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JULIUS CAESAR'S HELLRAISING YOUTH

Did he really defy tyrants and crucify pirates?

HISTORY MAGAZINE

SPECIAL INTEREST BRAND OF THE YEAR

December 2025

The woman who saved the Tudors

How Margaret Beaufort outwitted Richard III and forged a dynasty

Hitler's propaganda war

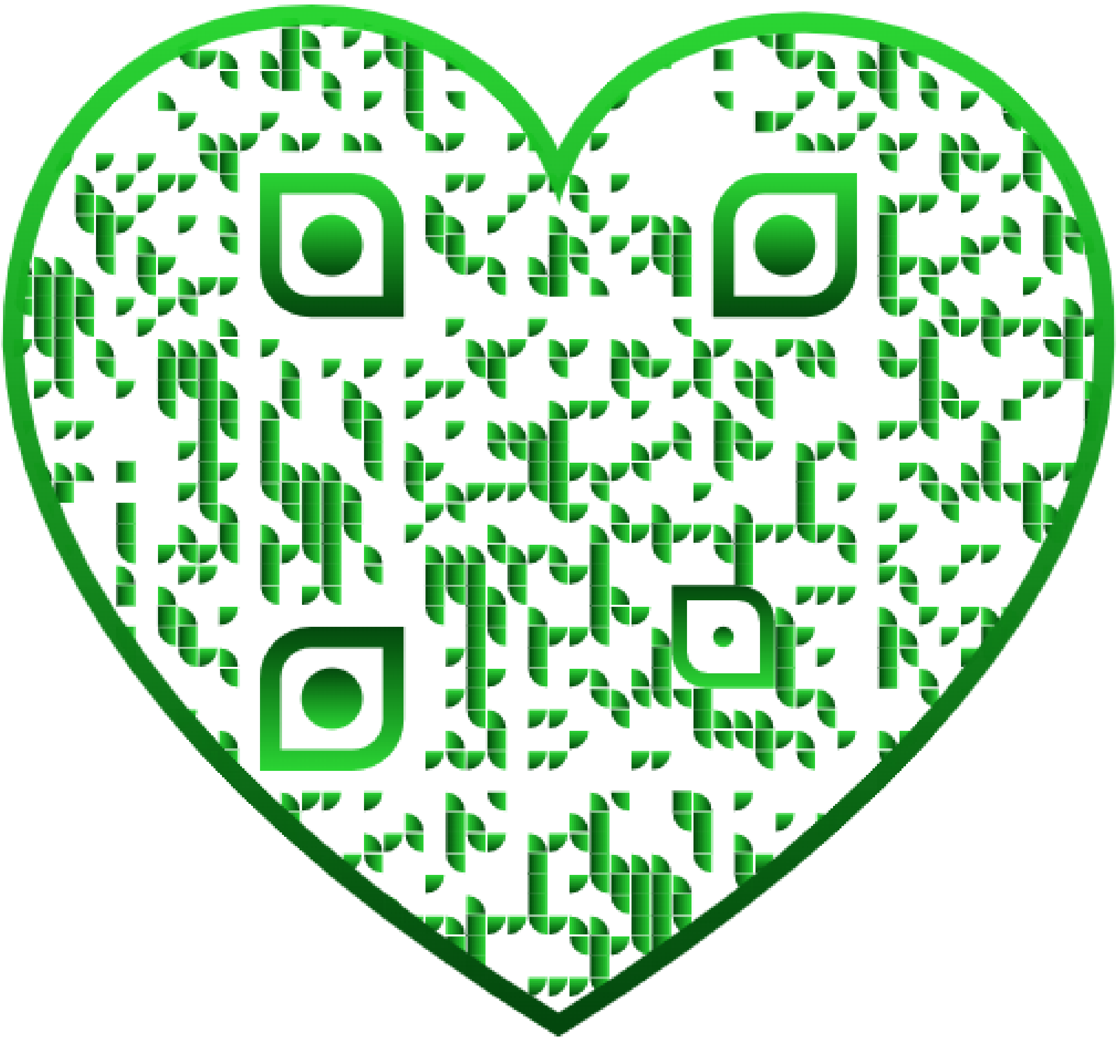
Why the Nazis used art to bolster their murderous regime

The triumph of Joan of Arc

How medieval women shaped the modern world

SURVIVING FRANCO

Spain's miraculous transition to democracy



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WELCOME DECEMBER 2025

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"Schemer. Manipulator. Murderer. As with many powerful women from the past, **Margaret Beaufort** has found herself in the firing line, viewed as a Machiavellian mastermind who, some believe, orchestrated the killing of the princes in the Tower – all in aid of her decades-long plan to install Henry Tudor as king of England. But in our cover feature, Lauren Johnson offers a different take. Though Margaret did facilitate Henry's ascent, it was only in the dying years of the Wars of the Roses that she may have realised that her son could achieve the ultimate prize. Turn to page 22 to see what Lauren has to say.

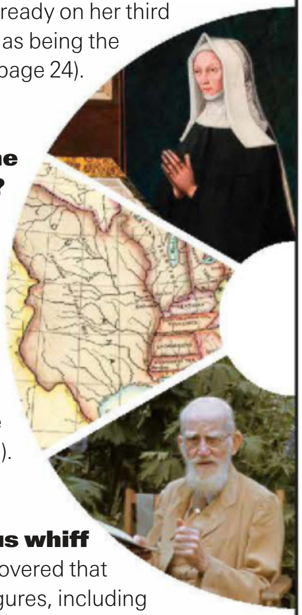
Also this month, we're exploring an equally dramatic transfer of power in more recent times. In November 1975 General Franco died and Spain's future seemed entirely uncertain. Would the authoritarian dictatorship endure, or might the country even be plunged into civil war once more? In the end, **Spain was able to transition into a democratic society**, but it could easily have been different. As you'll discover from Paul Preston's piece on page 28, it required a lot of bravery and compromise to steer Spain into a brighter future.

When we're thinking about the future, it's clear that **AI will be a key driver in the changes** that are to come. But what does AI mean for history itself? Should it be welcomed as a tool to allow historians to work faster and better? Or does it risk flattening out nuance and weakening public understanding? You can read six experts' thoughts in this month's *Conversation* article on page 11.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Rob Attar
Editor

THREE THINGS I'VE LEARNED THIS MONTH



1. Three weddings and a baby
One fact that really struck me in this month's cover feature was that, by the age of 15, Margaret Beaufort was already on her third marriage – as well as being the mother of a young son (page 24).

2. Bargain of the (19th) century?
In 1803, as I learned in this month's *Anniversaries*, the United States paid just $15m to acquire 828,000 square miles of land from France. In an instant, the Louisiana Purchase effectively doubled the size of the country (page 8).

3. An illustrious whiff
Reading *Q&A*, I discovered that several illustrious figures, including George Bernard Shaw, were involved in the interwar Smell Society. Despite its unusual name, the organisation had the laudable aim of improving air quality (page 37).

THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS

Janina Ramirez
"In virtually every revolutionary moment, women were excluded from shaping national identity. It's a profound injustice."
Janina reveals how men have co-opted women's stories for their own advantage down the centuries, on page 68

Paul Preston
"The forging of Spanish democracy was a collective triumph led by King Juan Carlos. It speaks to a people's collective determination never to face civil war and dictatorship again."
Paul explores how pluralism arose from the ashes of tyranny in post-Franco Spain, on page 28

Ruth Goodman
"In the Tudor era, everyone became that bit safer, the day-to-day became that bit more predictable, and a lot of people got a little bit richer."
Ruth explains why 16th-century England witnessed advances in peace and prosperity, on page 46

David S Potter
"When all is said and done, it was Julius Caesar's meticulous attention to detail and supreme ability to think on his feet that powered his incredible rise."
David considers how Caesar's formative years prepared him for political power, on page 40

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ON THE COVER: 16TH-CENTURY PORTRAIT OF MARGARET BEAUFORT (1443-1509), HEVER CASTLE LTD, KENT: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES. MARBLE BUST OF JULIUS CAESAR: GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE: BRIDGEMAN/GETTY IMAGES/JENI NOTT

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Did Henry VII's mother really spend decades plotting to put her son on the throne? **Lauren Johnson** investigates

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David S Potter examines what ancient sources tell us about the Roman leader's youth – and asks if they can be trusted

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Hitler used propaganda posters as a weapon to win German hearts and minds. **Lisa Pine** traces their impact

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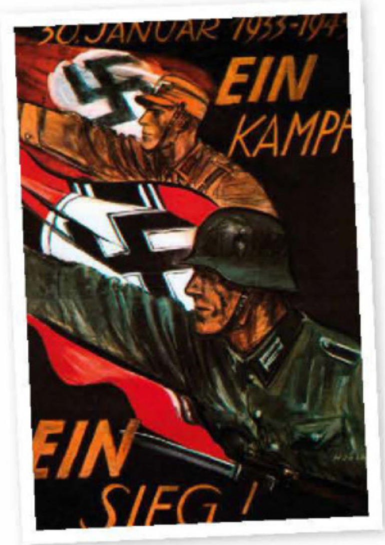

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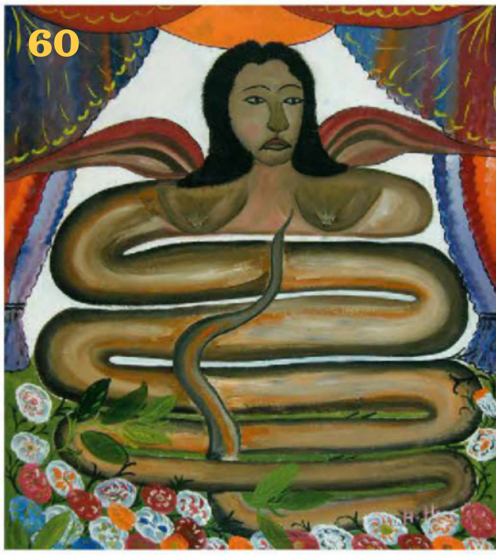

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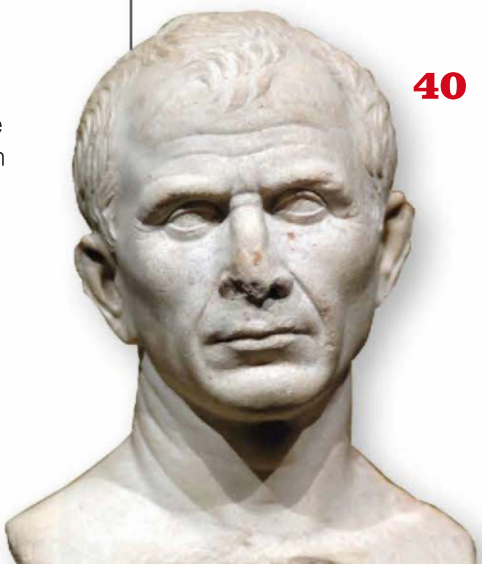

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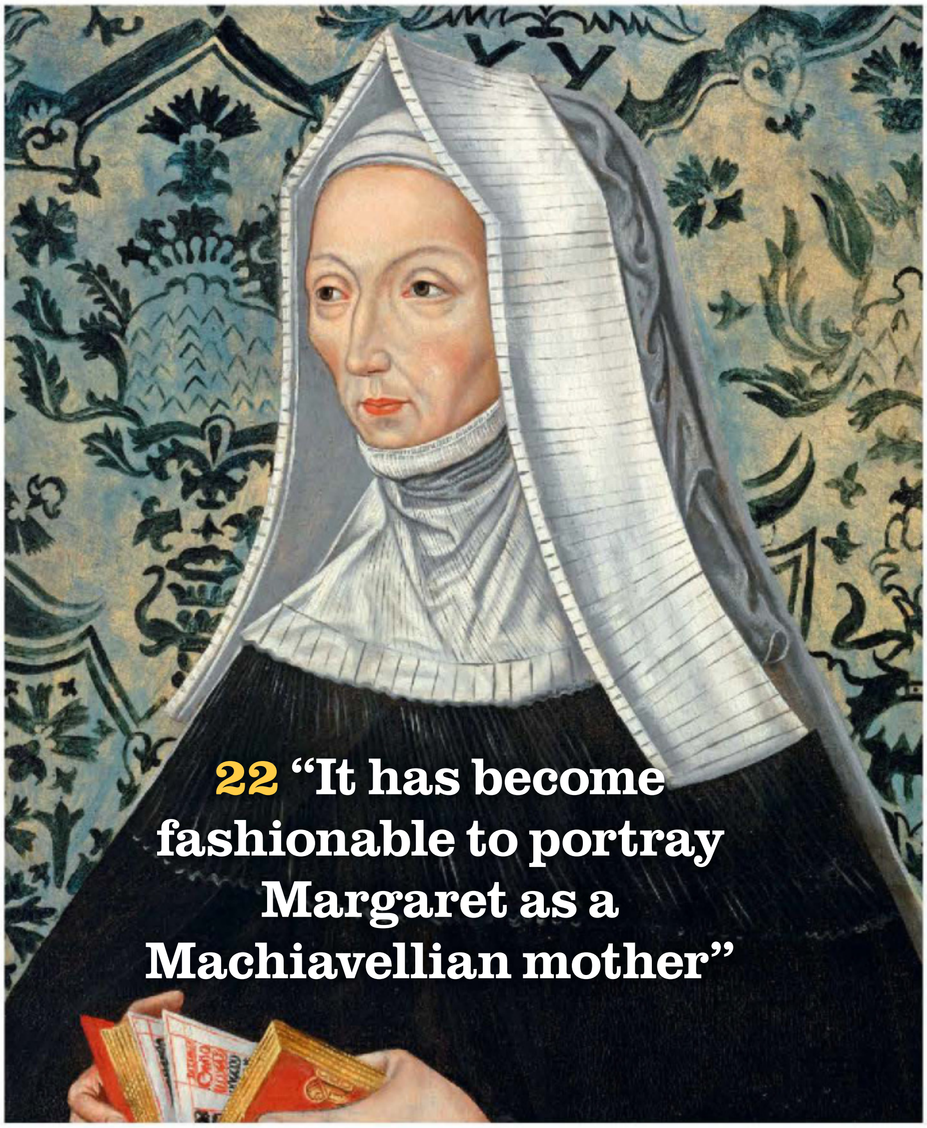

22 “It has become fashionable to portray Margaret as a Machiavellian mother”

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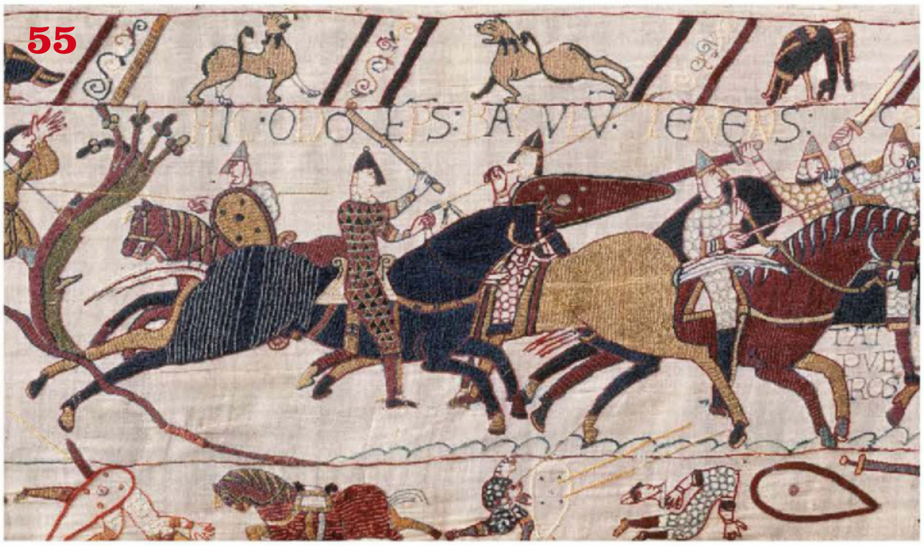

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ANNIVERSARIES

DANNY BIRD highlights events that took place in December in history

11 DECEMBER 1282

The Prince of Wales is killed

Llywelyn ap Gruffudd's death signals the end of Welsh sovereignty

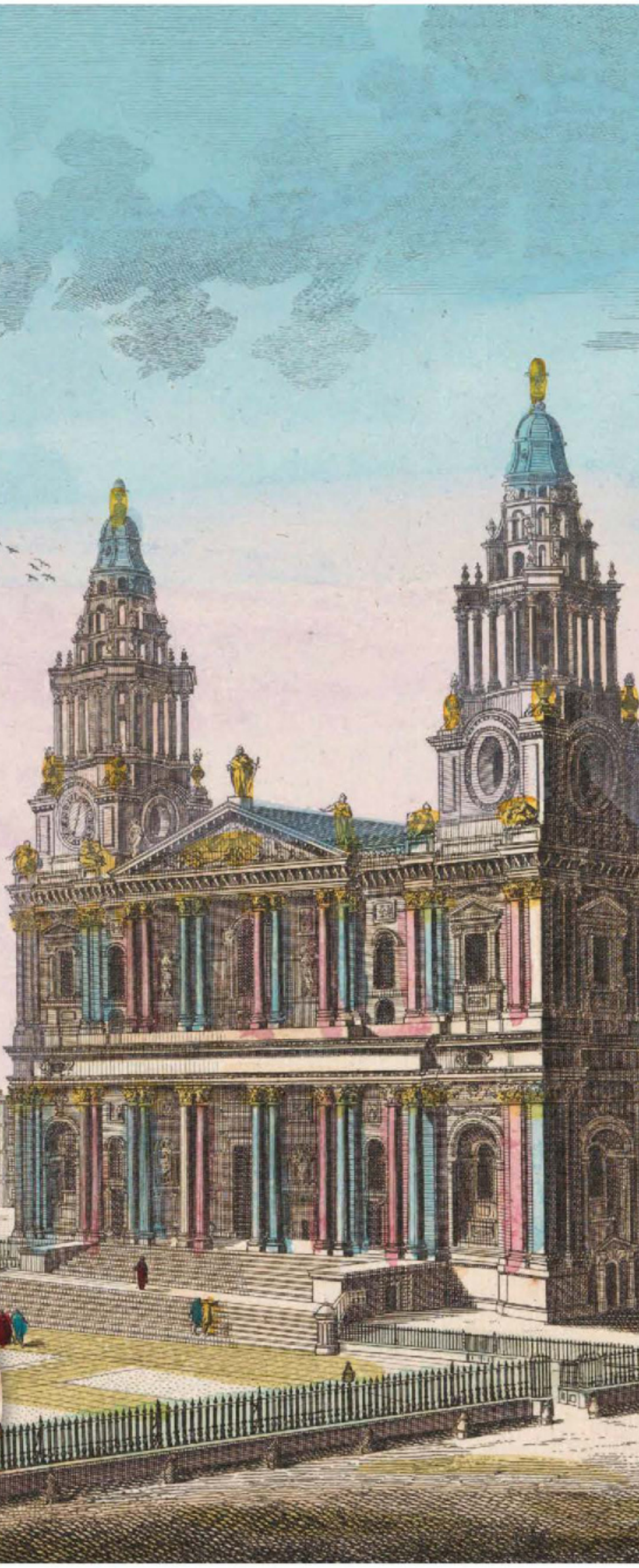
Amid the stark hills of Powys, the dream of an independent Wales was extinguished. Llywelyn ap Gruffudd lay dead.

Grandson of the great Llywelyn ap Iorwerth and often described as the last native Prince of Wales, Llywelyn had united north and south through military victories, alliances and ruthless ambition. At Bryn Derwin in 1255 he had defeated his own brothers in battle, and by 1258 other native rulers bent their knee to him. Officially recognised in the Treaty of Montgomery signed by Henry III of England in 1267, his principality seemed secure. Yet Henry's son, Edward I, coveted dominion over all Britain, and in 1277 marched on Wales with a huge army.

Defeated by the overwhelming English forces, Llywelyn's power was broken, his realm now limited to his Gwynedd heartlands in north-west Wales. Marriage to Eleanor de Montfort briefly bound him to Europe's great dynasties, but her death in childbirth in June 1282 left him bereft. That year, too, his volatile brother Dafydd ignited rebellion against the English with an attack on Hawarden Castle near Chester. At first the Welsh seemed ascendant: Edward's troops faltered at the Menai Strait, and his allies reeled in the south.

Then, in December, Llywelyn marched south to rouse support. Near Cilmeri, just west of Builth, he became separated from his army and, whether by treachery or mischance, was ambushed. Dressed in a simple tunic rather than armour, he was run through with a lance.

Only after his death was Llywelyn recognised. His head was severed, sent to Edward and spiked at the Tower of London. Though others – including his brother Dafydd and, later, Owain Glyndŵr – claimed the title Prince of Wales, Llywelyn's death marked the effective end of native Welsh rule.



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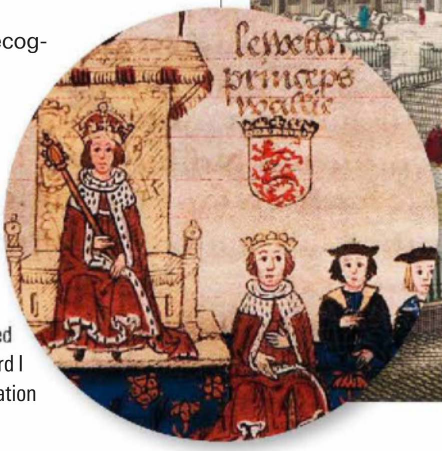
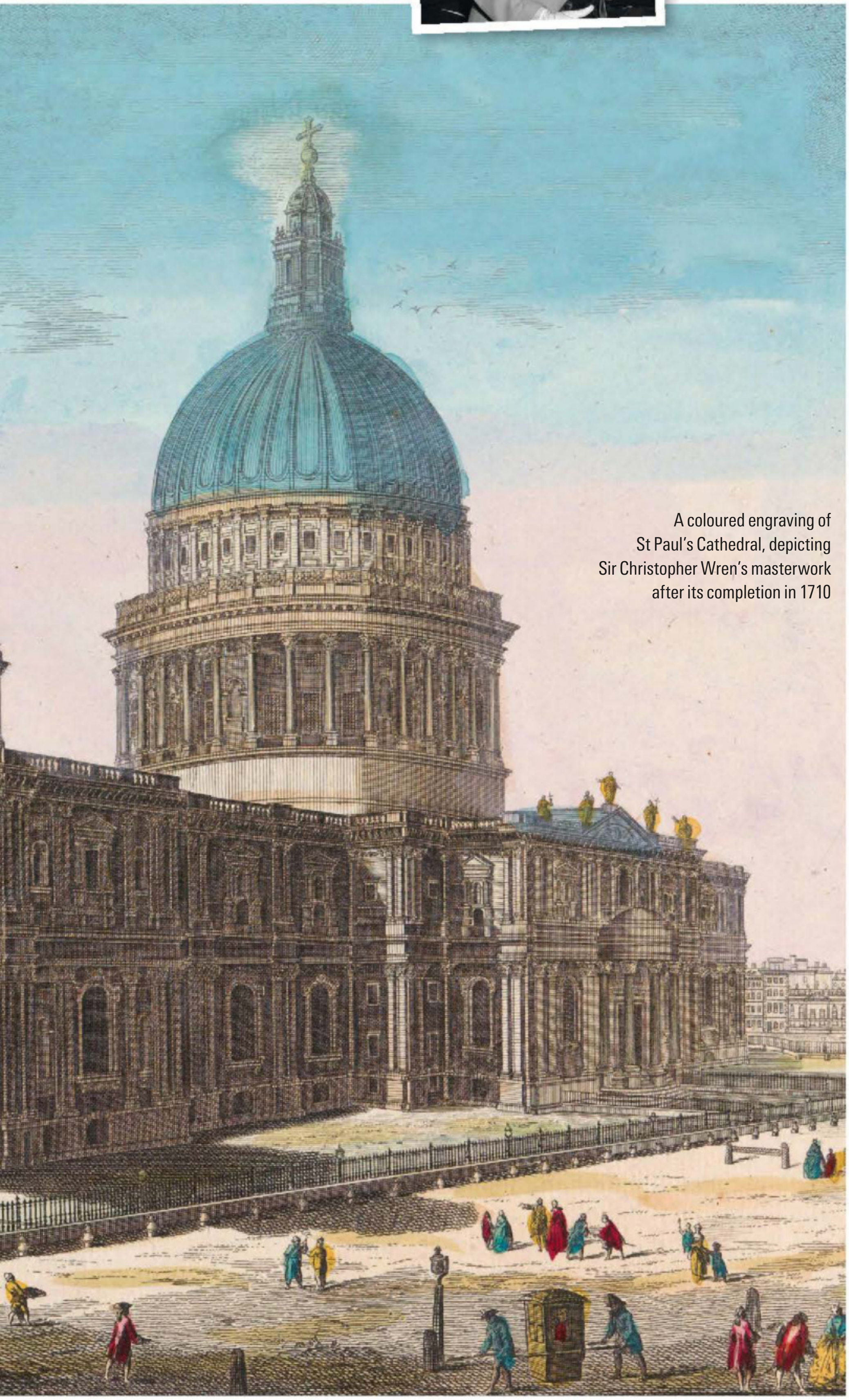


Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, pictured alongside his future nemesis, Edward I of England, in a late medieval illustration

Eleanor Roosevelt in Paris in 1948 when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted

10 DECEMBER 1948

Eleanor Roosevelt helps secure approval for the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** at the United Nations in Paris. Forty-eight nations vote to adopt it, forging a global commitment to dignity, liberty and enduring human rights.



A coloured engraving of St Paul's Cathedral, depicting Sir Christopher Wren's masterwork after its completion in 1710

2 DECEMBER 1697

The new St Paul's Cathedral is consecrated

Christopher Wren's radical church rises from the ashes of the Great Fire of London

Worshippers filed into St Paul's Cathedral, navigating a labyrinth of scaffolding and unfinished walls. The west end was incomplete and the magnificent dome had yet to rise, but the quire was ready to host its first service. Even in its unfinished state, St Paul's dominated the London skyline, and Wren's daring dome – supported by a concealed brick cone and iron chains – hinted at the architectural spectacle to come.

Around the site, the remarkable craftsmanship that had brought Sir Christopher Wren's vision to life was visible in every detail. Architect Nicholas Hawksmoor had refined structural elements, sculptor Francis Bird had added dramatic figures, woodcarver Grinling Gibbons had shaped intricate embellishments, and stonemasons Thomas and Edward Strong had laboured tirelessly. Among them worked Jane Brewer, the only woman recorded among those involved in the cathedral's construction.

The site was steeped in history. The Gothic medieval cathedral of 'old' St Paul's had stood here for centuries, a focal point of the city's religious and civic life, before the Great Fire of 1666 reduced it to a smouldering ruin. Wren, who had previously advised on repairs to the old building, now seized the opportunity to create something radically different.

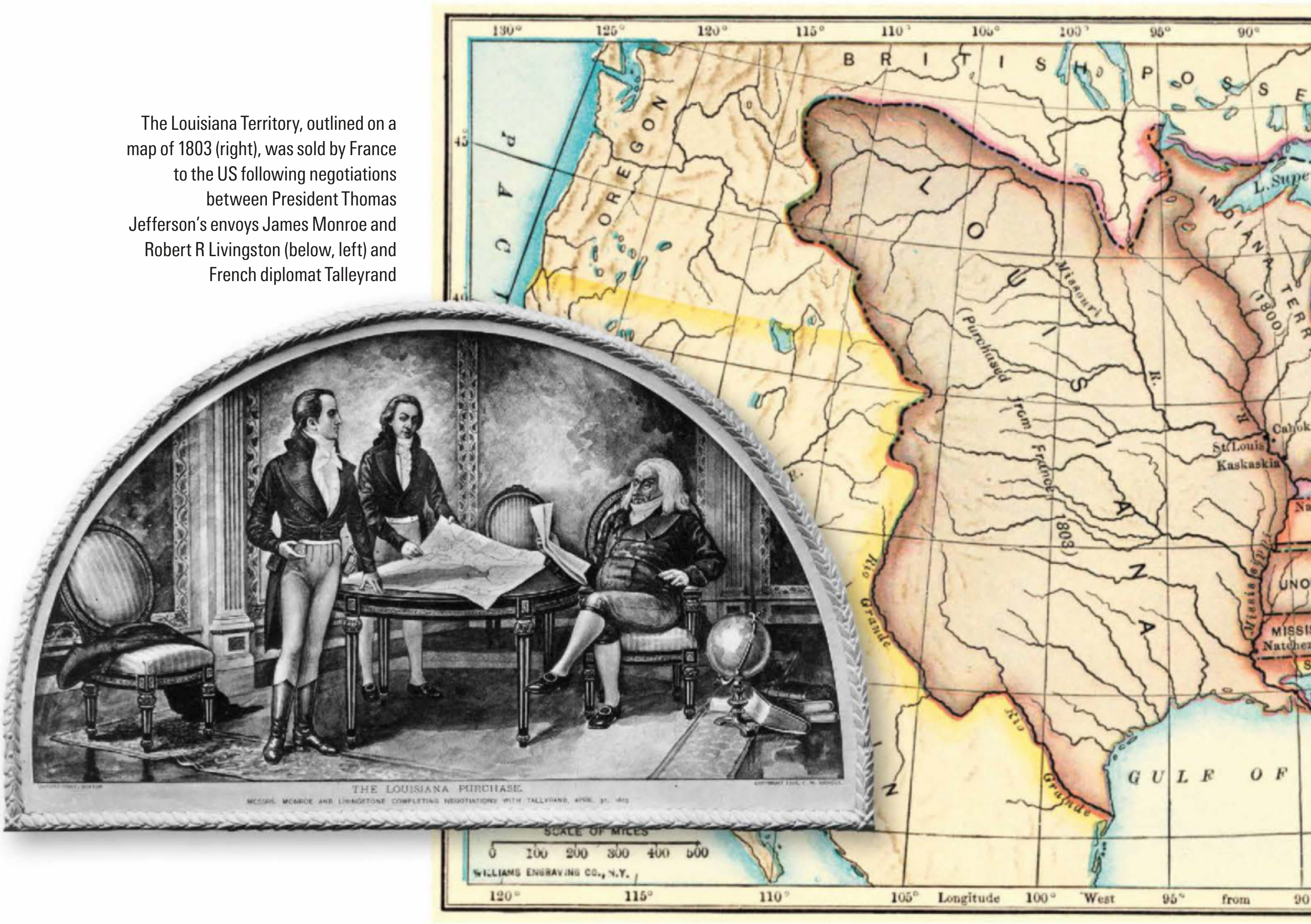
Construction ultimately took 35 years – a relatively short period for a cathedral. Wren's careful direction, together with the skill and labour of countless craftsmen, ensured that the new St Paul's rose as a testament to London's resilience and to Wren's enduring genius. As his son later inscribed within the cathedral: "Reader, if you seek his monument, look around you."

1 DECEMBER 1934

Prominent Soviet politician Sergei Kirov is assassinated in Leningrad, sparking a nationwide crisis. Stalin seizes the opportunity to orchestrate mass arrests, executions and purges among Communist Party members, crushing dissent and consolidating his absolute power.

High-ranking Soviet politician Sergei Kirov, pictured in 1934 shortly before his assassination

The Louisiana Territory, outlined on a map of 1803 (right), was sold by France to the US following negotiations between President Thomas Jefferson's envoys James Monroe and Robert R Livingston (below, left) and French diplomat Talleyrand


BRITISH POSSESSIONS
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PACIFIC
LOUISIANA
(Purchased from France 1803)
Missouri R.
INDIANA TERR. (1800)
L. Super
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Kaskaskia
Cahok
Rio Grande
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THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE
MESSRS. MONROE AND LIVINGSTONE COMPLETING NEGOTIATIONS WITH TALLYRAND, APRIL 30, 1803

20 DECEMBER 1803

The United States doubles in size

The young republic expands westward with the completion of the Louisiana Purchase

The morning air was charged with anticipation as the people of New Orleans gathered before the Cabildo, the grand seat of government on the Plaza de Armas (now Jackson Square). Almost three weeks earlier, Spanish officials had formally handed the vast Louisiana Territory – a swathe of land encompassing much of the central third of north America, stretching from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico – back to France. Now the Tricolore flag of France was to be lowered and replaced by the Stars and Stripes as the continent's borders were redrawn in one stately chamber, the Sala Capitular.

Within its walls stood three men: Pierre Clément de Laussat, French prefect of Louisiana; William CC Claiborne, erstwhile governor of the Mississippi Territory; and General James Wilkinson, commander of the United States Army. They had gathered for a solemn handover that reflected the shifting power of empires.

Laussat, who had briefly governed Louisiana, signed the decree transferring the territory to the US. The ownership of some 828,000 square miles of land was transferred for $15m – effectively doubling the size of the United States in one stroke.

As the keys to the city changed hands, Claiborne issued a proclamation to its citizens: "The government heretofore exercised… has ceased, and that of the United States of America is established." In the square outside, soldiers lowered the French flag as drums rolled, muskets fired, and the US flag unfurled to cheers from the crowd. Many must have felt nervous about this profound change and its consequences, yet all recognised the magnitude of the moment.

This was the culmination of years of anxiety over the Mississippi river, that vital artery of trade. For farmers in the western US, the right to sail their produce downstream to New Orleans had been a lifeline. Spain had

GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

Leaders of the newly declared Republic of Ezo in 1869. This experiment in democracy was crushed after six months

15 DECEMBER 1869

On the Japanese island now called **Hokkaido, rebels proclaim the Republic of Ezo**. Leaders rally citizens, draft laws and begin entrenching a degree of democracy. Ports hum with activity, soldiers train fiercely, and qualified voters step forward. Japanese imperial forces crush the fledgling democracy just six months later.

Quebec
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grudgingly permitted it; France's resurgence at the turn of the 19th century threatened to extinguish it. President Thomas Jefferson had admitted that "every eye in the US is now fixed on this affair of Louisiana". Now, the fears of war dissolved in a triumph for diplomacy and the promise of new frontiers.

The sale itself was born of simmering geopolitical tensions. For more than a decade, Saint-Domingue – France's richest colony – had been racked by the Haitian Revolution, led by self-emancipated Africans. That turmoil, and ongoing instability in Europe, had severely tested French designs on the Americas. Napoleon, first consul since 1799 and already Europe's most formidable leader, saw little sense in defending Louisiana once the Caribbean slipped from his grasp. In selling the territory, he unwittingly paved the way for the US to expand west to the Pacific.

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A computer-generated impression of Nasa's *Galileo* probe in orbit around Jupiter

7 DECEMBER 1995

The *Galileo* probe arrives at Jupiter

An extraordinary mission begins to reveal the giant planet's mysteries

After a six-year, 2.3-billion-mile odyssey, the *Galileo* spacecraft reached the largest planet in our solar system. Launched in October 1989 by Space Shuttle *Atlantis*, *Galileo* had endured delays and technical woes. Its journey had involved gravitational slingshots around Venus and Earth, two asteroid encounters, and a ringside view of the impact of Comet Shoemaker–Levy 9 smashing into Jupiter.

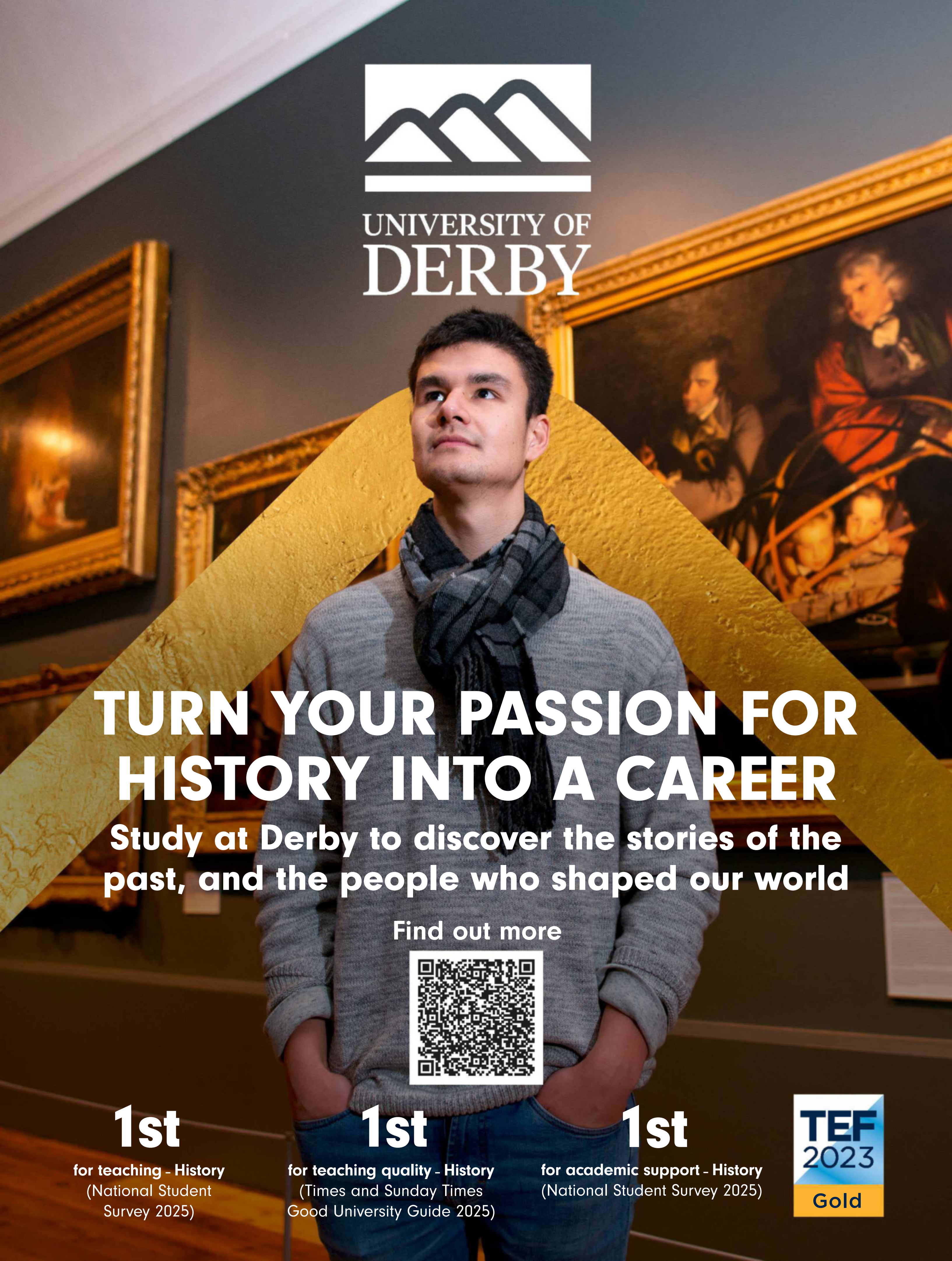
The moment of truth came as *Galileo* deployed a smaller probe, resembling a kettledrum, that plunged into the Jovian atmosphere at a speed of 106,000mph, creating heat twice that on the Sun's surface. For 58 incredible minutes it radioed back new insights into Jupiter's winds, temperature and atmospheric chemistry before succumbing to the overwhelming heat and pressure.

When the first signal confirming success arrived at Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, relief and joy erupted into cheers, applause and tears, with scientist David Morrison exclaiming: "We have a spacecraft inside the atmosphere of a giant planet for the first time."

This success had been achieved in spite of significant setbacks. *Galileo*'s main antenna had failed to open in 1991, choking the rate of data transfer, and its tape recorder developed alarming faults. Ingenious engineers coaxed the low-gain antenna into action and applied advanced compression methods to ensure that precious findings still reached Earth, albeit at a painstaking eight bits per second.

Once the smaller probe had been deployed, *Galileo* fired its engine and slipped into Jovian orbit, entering a mission stage lasting nearly eight years. It meticulously mapped Jupiter's swirling clouds, immense magnetic field and enigmatic moons, sending back a wealth of data and 14,000 photos. Despite technical challenges and punishing radiation, *Galileo* exceeded expectations, transforming planetary science and expanding humanity's understanding of the solar system. H

Danny Bird is content producer on *BBC History Magazine*



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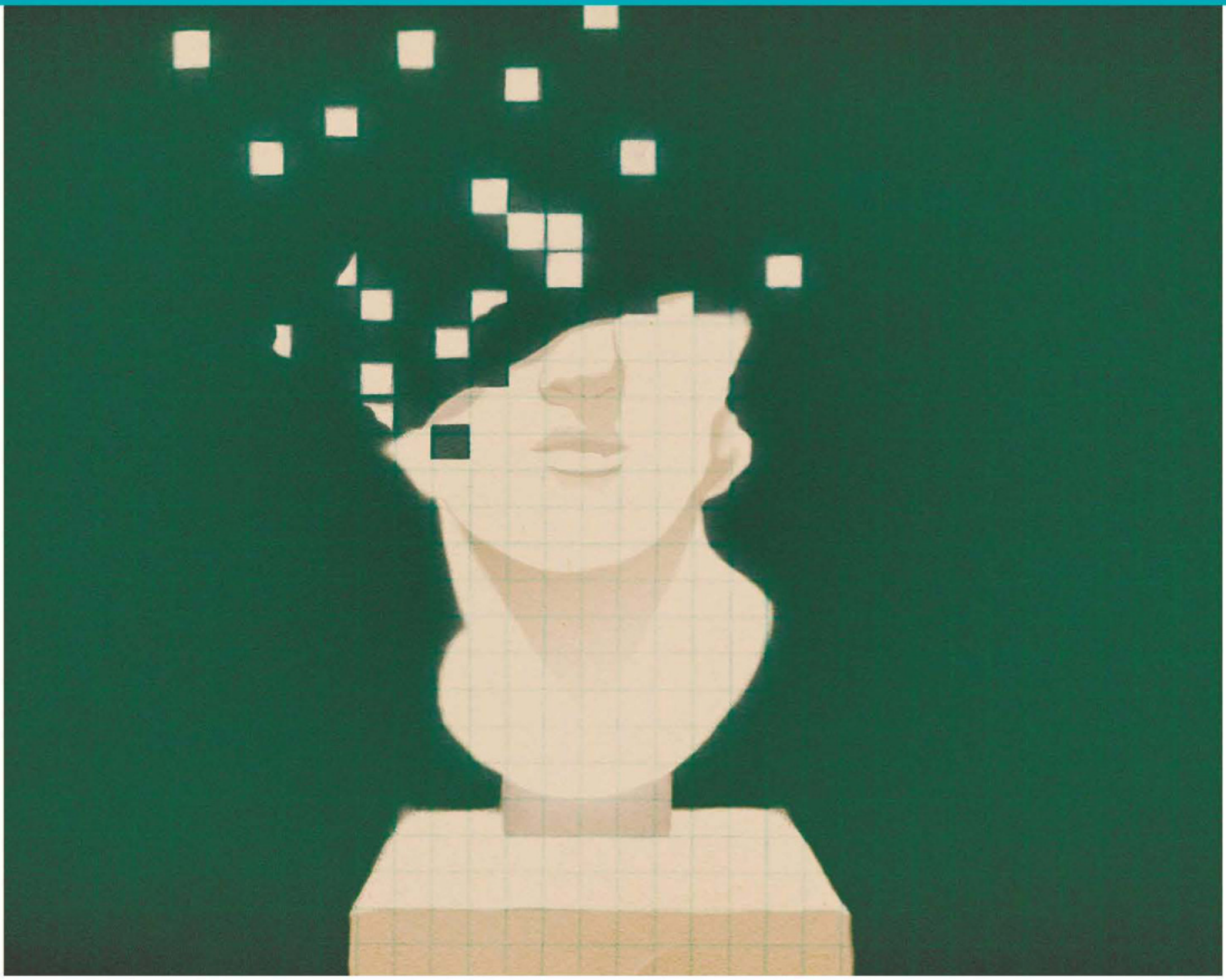


ILLUSTRATION BY **HUGH COWLING**

THE BIG QUESTIONS

Is the advance of AI good or bad for history?

As artificial intelligence penetrates almost every aspect of our lives, six historians debate whether the opportunities it offers to the discipline outweigh the threats

COMPILED BY **JONATHAN WRIGHT**

“We must experiment thoughtfully, push back critically, and make the case that slow, humanistic thinking still matters”

DELFI NIETO-ISABEL

Artificial intelligence isn’t inherently good or bad. Like the printing press or the written word itself, AI is a force – and whether it enhances or undermines historical practice will depend on who uses it, how, and why.

AI’s most obvious advantage is that it can process vast amounts of data much faster than your regular historian, which turns it into an incredible asset. The trick here is to use it as it was originally meant to be used – not to replace human interpretation but to identify patterns that humans might not notice and, thus, to enable us to come up with better, more nuanced questions.

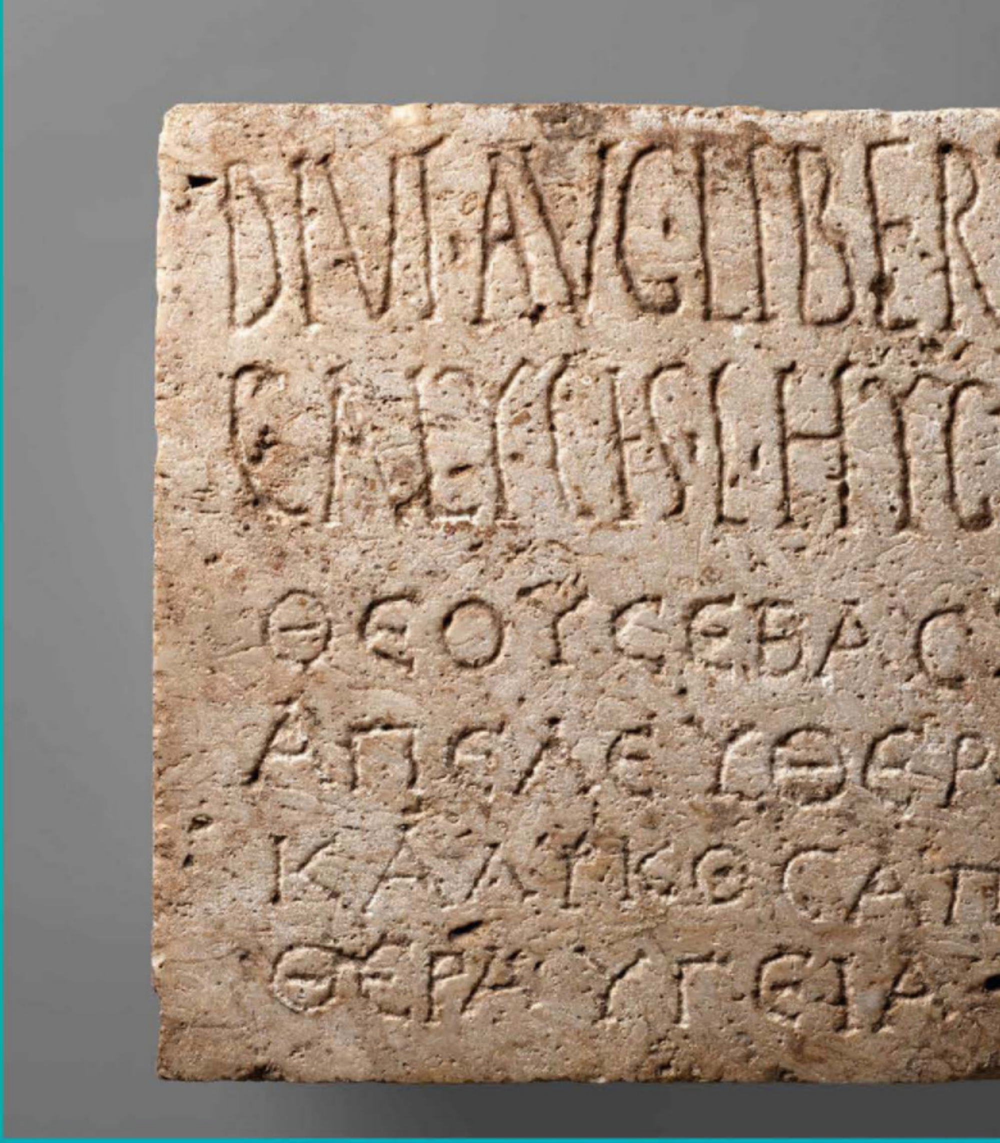
But it goes beyond that. AI is forcing historians to rethink what constitutes evidence, authorship and interpretation. In doing so, it is not just supporting existing historical methods, it’s helping evolve them.

Though I am not worried that historians will be replaced by AI any time soon, there is a risk that indiscriminate use might flatten out the practice. Good history requires doubt, contradiction, ambivalence, even uncertainty, but AI models are designed to produce smooth answers even when the data is messy or the past is unknowable.

Moreover, history isn’t just knowledge – it’s a method of knowing. If AI shortcuts the method, it threatens the discipline’s integrity. There is little doubt that AI will be part of historical research, but it is crucial that historians shape its use to enhance rather than undermine our craft. We should resist the urge to scale for scale’s sake, and instead use AI to deepen, not dilute, historical understanding. If we do that, and embed AI within the discipline’s values – critical thinking, reflexivity, contextual awareness – then historians will become central in answering the question of whether AI is good or bad for history.

We must experiment thoughtfully, push back critically, and make the case that slow, humanistic thinking still matters, even in an age of rapid computation. I am confident that the tables will turn, and we’ll soon talk about the ways in which history is good for AI.

Delfi Nieto-Isabel is a lecturer in medieval and digital history, and co-director of the Digital Lives Programme at Queen Mary University of London



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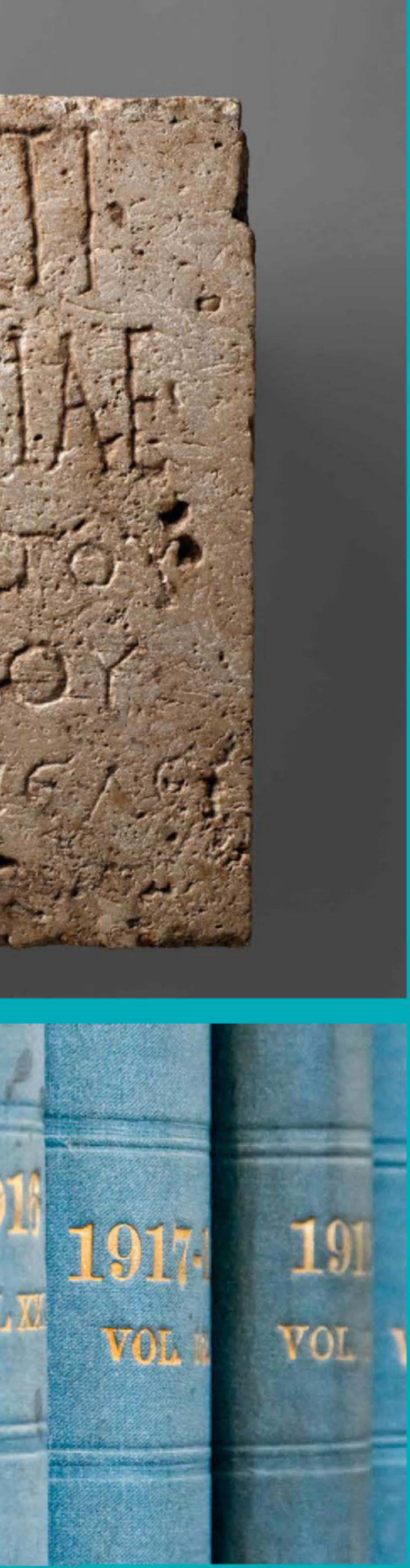


FROM TOP: **A bilingual funerary inscription in Latin and Greek – one of countless texts from the ancient Roman world that AI can search and compare; Hansard, the official record of British parliamentary debates compiled by reporters such as Jean Winder (left, in 1947), is another vast repository of information that AI can help interrogate**

GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

"The best results come when humans work alongside machine-generated intuitions"

JONATHAN PRAG

In his classic *Foundation* series, sci-fi author Isaac Asimov explored the idea of statistically based 'psycho-history', by which the future could be predicted through the mathematical analysis of data on the past and present. With the rise of generative AI, it may feel as if a dystopian version of Asimov's future is edging towards reality, but there are grounds to be a little more positive.

A great deal of what historians do is attempting to understand past societies by observing patterns in the evidence they left behind. Machines are spectacularly good at this, and the large language models of contemporary AI take this to a new level.

To take an example from my own area of work, texts inscribed on stone in a variety of ancient languages survive from the Roman world in their hundreds of thousands. These are often fragmentary and difficult to interpret. To make sense of them, both individually and en masse, as evidence for ancient societies and languages, historians need to compare these texts with one another. But to do so requires familiarity with them all, and the ability to find and compare parallels or identify patterns. Large language models specially trained on this material can now offer suggestions for missing words, dates and origins of this material, precisely because they see patterns across the material that a solitary human might find only after days or weeks of library work – or not at all.

The crucial point, however, is that these are suggestions – and the models can offer multiple suggestions, ranked by probability and exposing some of the underlying reasoning. The best results come when humans work alongside machine-generated intuitions. Correlation is not the same as causation, and history is a fundamentally human 'science'. Nuance, context and, above all, humanity is fundamental to understanding our past, present and future. If that is surrendered to a machine then all of it is lost, and we are no longer writing our own history.

Every generation writes its own history, it's said. Powerful AI can stimulate that process – but it certainly cannot write it for us.

Jonathan Prag is professor of ancient history at the University of Oxford, and a co-author of the *Aeneas* AI model for contextualising ancient inscriptions (*predictingthepast.com*)

"Fake 'historical' images and texts are already circulating and, with ever-greater sophistication, they will become harder to spot"

JANE WINTERS

Historians have been using AI for many years as an important tool for exploring and analysing the vast digitised and born-digital materials that increasingly constitute our primary sources. For instance, using AI it becomes possible to extract the names of all members of parliament mentioned in historical Hansard, identify the themes and topics on which they have spoken, and trace changes of emphasis over time. Handwritten text recognition technologies enable the accurate transcription of manuscript collections at scale. There are many other examples.

This has been unhelpfully elided by the use of 'AI' as synonymous with generative AI. Machine learning, however, has not captured the public imagination in the same way as GenAI, with its easy-to-use chatbot interfaces. The speed with which GenAI has become near-ubiquitous, allowing no time to consider all of the ramifications, seems bewildering. Familiar software packages and media platforms are increasingly cluttered with invitations to ask an AI assistant for help. The AI-generated is entangled with the human-created in ways that undoubtedly pose real difficulties for the integrity of the historical record. Fake 'historical' images and texts are already circulating and, with ever-greater sophistication, they will become harder to spot.

This is a huge challenge, but it is also an opportunity for historians to apply their knowledge and expertise to a problem that requires particular critical skills. A 2025 study sponsored by Microsoft sought to identify those occupations most at risk from GenAI. Historians came second, behind interpreters and translators. Dredge operators, last on the list, can apparently be more confident about their future role.

But historians can help navigate this new knowledge landscape. Insightful source criticism, deep understanding of context, awareness of archival absence and loss, and a commitment to centring the human experience in the technological are key elements of historical research and practice. Arguably, they have never been more useful.

Jane Winters is professor of digital humanities at the School of Advanced Study, University of London

“Reading is thinking. Writing is thinking. These core skills cannot be outsourced without losing something fundamental”

CHRIS SPARKS

We seek to understand ourselves by exploring our pasts – and AI will not change this fundamental urge. The digital revolution has already transformed the historian’s work considerably, without fundamentally altering our purpose. Much change has been positive. Barriers of geography, cost and materiality have collapsed, broadening access to history as never before.

Less profitably, instant access and keyword searching deprive us of context, and we are less likely to understand the systems that sort, sift and deliver our sources. Always, we shape and are shaped by our tools in a relationship that must be carefully negotiated.

Utopians and naysayers are united in their confidence that AI will change everything. We must recognise such predictions as products of a moment of frenzied development and investment. Once the hype has died down, historians will adapt – just as we did to that other over-hyped but transformational technology, the internet.

We will use AI where it can help us – to automate repetitive tasks, to ‘distantly read’ sources identifying areas for closer inspection, or to hone our prose. But we will remain wary of its dangers – not least its tendency to hide its sources and make things up. Hopefully, new tools will become available that reduce our dependence on centrally controlled systems, allowing more thoughtful, bespoke and informed use.

We must think carefully about how we use AI in the classroom, too. Students learn that critical reading and precision writing are the essential tools for engaging with the complex human past. Reading is thinking. Writing is thinking. These core skills cannot be outsourced without losing something fundamental. They can be honed only with practice, and we must protect space for that in our teaching. Yet we cannot simply ignore AI, because we have begun to encounter its output routinely in our daily lives.

History is a project, not a product. If AI ushers in an era of fast, cheap, mass-produced text, then the skills that history teaches will only become more valuable.

Chris Sparks is a senior lecturer in digital history at Queen Mary University of London

“AI offers the chance to explore archives at scale, ask new questions and uncover new patterns”

TIM COLE

There are plenty of anxieties about AI. This should not surprise us: in the past, new technologies such as the railway resulted in moral panics. Rather than a threat, AI can be used – just as other technologies have been.

It is important to draw a distinction between functions sometimes described as ‘generative’ and ‘hermeneutic’. The former is what first comes to mind: it can be used to write text, including historical arguments. The latter is using AI to ‘distant read’ large bodies of texts, including archives.

Much criticism levelled at AI tends to focus on generative AI – for example, teachers’ fears that students will ‘cheat’ on essays, simply entering the assigned title and word length as a prompt, then leaving AI to produce a passable composition within seconds.

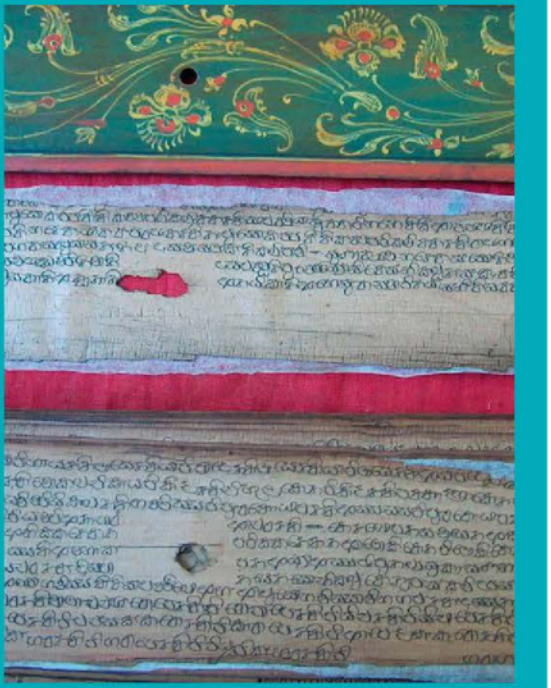
Where AI has greater value for historians is as a hermeneutic tool. It is helpful to remember a point that Todd Presner makes to scholars in his 2024 book *Ethics of the Algorithm: Digital Humanities and Holocaust Memory* – that computers ‘read’ differently from humans, but neither better nor worse than us. The challenge facing historians is how to use this technology to ask new questions, particularly to interrogate vast archives that cannot be comprehensively searched through more traditional methods.

One area in which I, and other interdisciplinary teams, have been experimenting is using digital methods to access stories of Holocaust survivors in oral history collections. These are typically too large for any one person to watch in their life. The USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, for example, contains more than 55,000 interviews, each 2–3 hours long.

Rather than replacing close reading – or watching and listening – of these interviews, AI offers the chance to explore archives at scale, ask new questions and uncover new patterns that invite close reading. For example, what pronouns – I or we – do men and women use to tell what is variously a solo or shared story? Where and why do silences occur in oral history archives as the past becomes too hard to retell? Critical use offers opportunities to do history differently.

Tim Cole is professor of social history at the University of Bristol

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES



FROM TOP: **A Jewish woman holds a copy of fake papers enabling her to flee the Netherlands after the Nazi invasion: AI helps researchers search huge archives of testimonies by Holocaust survivors; the Cullavagga manuscript written in Sinhalese Pali: AI assists historians mapping connections between texts in various languages; The Maughan Library, King's College London: "Students learn that critical reading and precision writing are the essential tools for engaging with the complex human past," says Chris Sparks**

"AI promises to make history faster, but also shallower"

BHADRAJEE HEWAGE

AI is often hailed as the next great tool for historians. It can scan entire archives in seconds, collate references across databases, and generate polished prose at the click of a button. On the surface, this seems like liberation from drudgery. But, in speeding up our work, AI also risks hollowing it out.

History is not simply a matter of data extraction. The working historian does more than harvest facts: we interrogate silences in sources, wrestle with contradictions in established narratives, and read against the grain of the archive. AI machine tools excel at spotting patterns but fail at understanding nuance. They can tell you how often a phrase appears in a colonial newspaper, but not why irony mattered to the writer, nor how absence itself can be evidence. Outsourcing too much to algorithms risks confusing fluency with insight.

The bigger danger, however, lies in how AI will shape the dissemination of history. Museums, publishers and even classrooms may come to rely on AI-generated summaries to teach the past. This could democratise access, but it could also flatten differences and sanitise conflict. History risks being repackaged into uniform, bite-sized 'lessons' optimised for clarity rather than complexity. That should alarm any historian who believes that the discipline's value lies in argument and debate.

AI will certainly change the rhythms of our work. It helps me, as a historian of modern subcontinental Buddhism, to map far-flung connections between texts in English, Hindi and Sinhalese. But if I do not remain critical, it is all too easy to mistake the machine's quick outputs for deeper interpretation. And if the wider public comes to accept AI's versions of the past as authoritative, the historian's role as interpreter and critic could be diminished.

The challenge for us is clear. AI will not replace historians, but it could deskill us if we let it. Indeed, it promises to make history faster, but also shallower. Our task is to ensure that the speed it offers does not come at the cost of depth – because history done fast is rarely history done well. H

Bhadrajee Hewage recently completed a DPhil in history from Trinity College Oxford, researching trends in subcontinental Buddhism during the late colonial and early postcolonial periods

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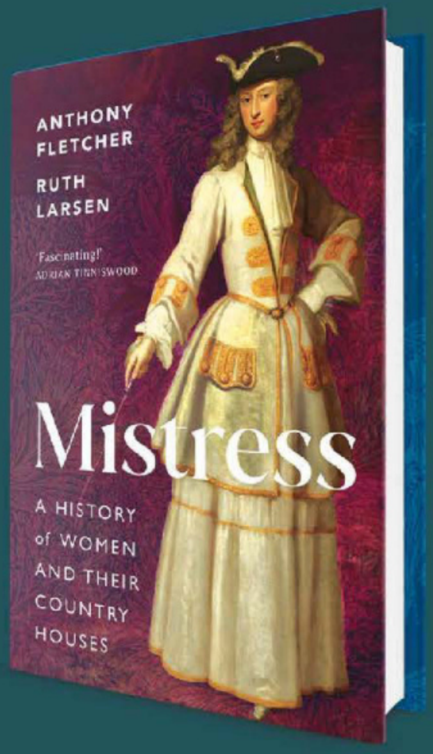
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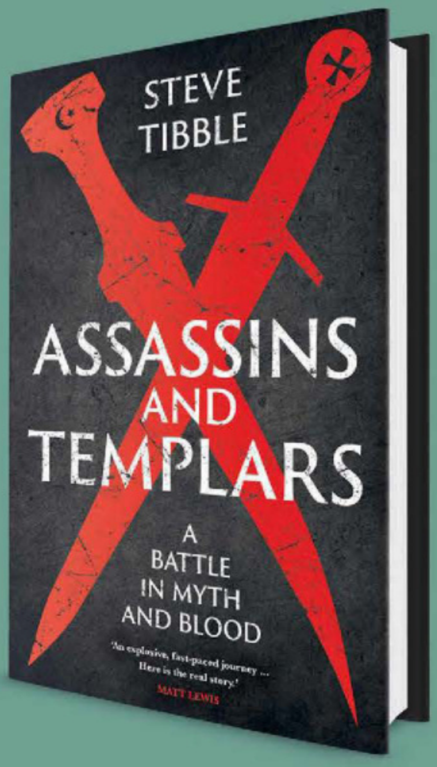
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A BATTLE IN MYTH AND BLOOD
'An explosive, fast-paced journey … Here is the real story.'
MATT LEWIS

‘An explosive, fast-paced journey’
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Yale

MICHAEL WOOD ON...
THE EXTRAORDINARY ART OF THE PICTS

"The Book of Kells is a masterwork of medieval calligraphy and painting"

THE BOOK OF KELLS, ONE OF THE GREATEST pieces of medieval art, is today displayed in the library of Trinity College Dublin. This illuminated gospel book is named after the monastery in County Meath where it was kept in the Middle Ages. It's a masterwork of medieval calligraphy and painting, with its Celtic knot patterns, scintillating colour, and the staggering intricacies of the display pages and canon tables – all smoky golden magnificence.

An Irish annalist called the book "the great Gospel of Columcille [Columba], the chief relic of the western world". It may be the work described by the historian Gerald of Wales in the 1180s, in his book on Ireland. "Look more keenly at it and you will penetrate to the very shrine of art," he wrote. "You will make out intricacies so delicate and so subtle… that you might say that all this were the work of an angel, and not of a man."

The book survived war, plunder and the English – Cromwell's troops were once billeted in Kells. In the 19th century, it was a huge influence on the Celtic revival movement in the arts, and today is seen as the pinnacle of the western tradition of illuminated manuscripts.

The book was produced around the end of the eighth century, just at the moment Britain and Ireland were about to be changed forever by the arrival of the Vikings. It was long believed to have been created on Iona. But in *The Book of Kells: Unlocking the Enigma*, published in October, Victoria Whitworth suggests that it was actually written at the Pictish monastery of Portmahomack on the Moray Firth in north-east Scotland.

This is one of the least known areas of the medieval British Isles. The Pictish monasteries were destroyed in the Viking age, and with them virtually all written records. The kingdom of the Picts became part of the Scottish kingdom of Alba in the ninth century, and gradually the memory of the Picts faded, leaving many unsolved mysteries. One key survival is their stone carving, of which there are brilliant examples in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Some, such as the huge memorial slab from Hilton of Cadboll etched with horsemen and hunting dogs, are absolutely stunning.

You can still see these wonderful works of art on the ground when you head up the coast of north-east Scotland. At Aberlemno is a magnificent carving perhaps commemorating the battle of Nechtansmere in 685 at which the Pictish king Bridei defeated and killed the Northumbrian invader King Ecgfrith. And by St Vigeans Church on the outskirts of Arbroath there's a fascinating museum holding more than 30 pieces of Pictish sculpture.

This Pictish trail leads to Portmahomack, a beautiful spot on the Tarbat peninsula looking across to the distant hills of Sutherland. The origins of Christianity here are still obscure. Bede mentions a saint whom we know as Ninnian, who evangelised in the fifth century. In the sixth century came St Columba, who reached as far north as Moray.

But it was only in the 1990s that the first excavation of a Pictish monastery took place at Portmahomack. Its construction began around 550 – which might fit with a foundation by St Columba – and was probably destroyed in a Viking attack in the early ninth century, though some kind of community hung on after that. It was later dedicated to St Colman of Lindisfarne, who played a famous role in the Synod of Whitby in 664 – the great debate over Celtic and Roman traditions of Easter. Colman then returned to Iona and died in Ireland, but he was still celebrated in later times at Portmahomack.

When excavating the levels burned during the Viking raid, the archaeologist found over 200 fragments of Pictish stone carving in a style very similar to the Book of Kells. This led Dr Whitworth to propose that the most famous of all Irish manuscripts was actually made here. Indeed, finds from the dig included workshops and a room where vellum was prepared, interpreted as a scriptorium – perhaps the very place where the Book of Kells was written?

All of this only underlines how much we still don't know about the early Middle Ages in the outer reaches of Britain. We don't even know the site's original name. As for the Picts themselves – still known today by the name that the late Romans gave them, meaning the 'painted people' – their identity eventually merged with the Scots, and their language (probably pre-Indo-European?) became extinct. But recent DNA studies suggest that their legacy endures in the genetic inheritance of people across Scotland. And of course in Trinity College Dublin you can still glimpse the unique, dazzling, colourful vision that infused the astonishing art of the *Picti.* H

Michael Wood is professor of public history at the University of Manchester. He has presented numerous BBC series. His books include *The Story of China* (Simon & Schuster, 2021). You'll find him on X at *MichaelWoodMV*

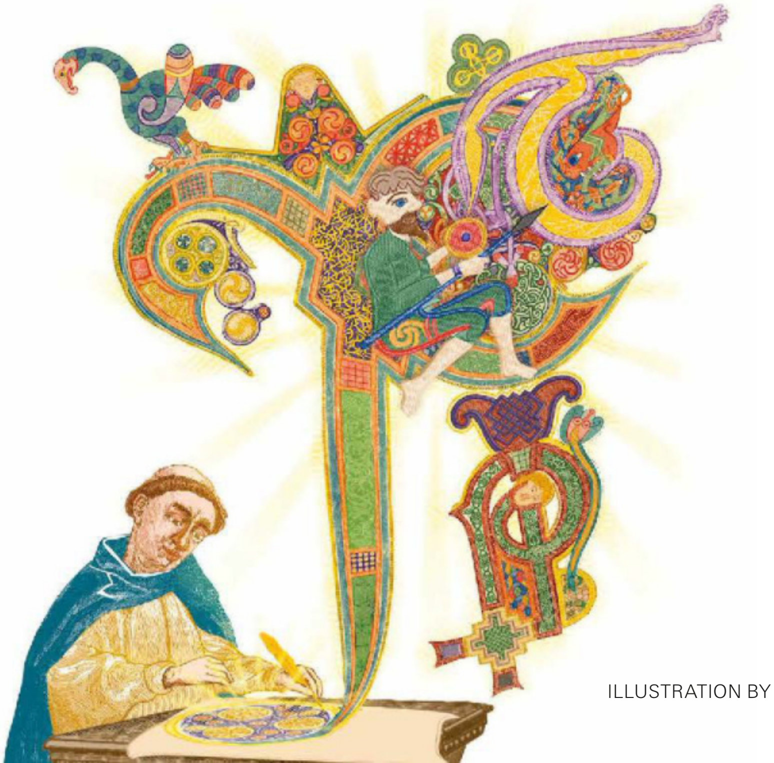

ILLUSTRATION BY **FEMKE DE JONG**

FRAN MONKS

HIDDEN HISTORIES

KAVITA PURI on an act of wartime heroism still remembered in Kolkata

"Everyone cried unashamedly at the news of this young pilot's death"

Kavita Puri is a journalist and broadcaster for BBC Radio 4. Her latest BBC Sounds series is *The History Podcast: The Second Map*. She is the author of *Partition Voices: Untold British Stories* (Bloomsbury, 2019)

IF YOU STROLL ACROSS THE GREEN SWATHE OF the Maidan in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) – past the monumental marble Victoria Memorial built to honour that Empress of India – and keep heading south, the city noise fades, and so too does the bustle. Off Debendra Lal Khan Road by the Tolly Canal, and opposite the zoological garden, are the gates of Bhowanipore Cemetery. Walk through them and you enter a world of order and peace.

At the back, beyond lines of graves from the 19th and 20th century, are the headstones of young, mainly British men who fought in both world wars and died here. Many perished from diseases such as malaria and smallpox; some were killed in accidents, and one was apparently murdered while off duty. Also here are the graves of 14 Scottish soldiers from the Black Watch battalion who died in the cyclone of 16 October 1942 in Midnapore, west of Kolkata, as well as troops from a merchant ship hit by the Japanese in the Second World War.

On one headstone is etched the name of a man I had heard about from elderly Indians and British people who had lived in the city during the war. Arthur Maurice Owers Pring – known to everyone simply as Pring – was a pilot in the Royal Air Force. He was killed at the age of just 22 while defending Calcutta from an aerial bombing attack by Japanese forces.

This dark chapter opened on 20 December 1942, when Japanese fighter planes filled the skies. Navigating by moonlight, a force of eight Imperial Japanese Army Air Service medium bombers, code-named 'Sally' by the Allies, scattered their weapons around the city. The oil plant at Budge Budge, on the Hooghly river south-west of the city, was one of the places hit. Raids continued the following night, and on 23, 24 and 28 December – the most devastating assault coming on Christmas Eve.

The city was largely undefended militarily. A detachment of Beaufighters from RAF 89 Squadron in Egypt was diverted to Calcutta, arriving on 12 January 1943. Two days later, a new squadron was raised: No. 176. Its motto was *Nocte Custodimus* – "We keep the night watch." The young men who made up that new squadron were already veterans. One of them, Flying Officer Arthur Maurice Pring, had successfully taken out enemy planes at night over Egypt and Sicily. He had just been initiated into his new squadron when the moon returned – and so did the Japanese bombers. By 9.45pm he was in the air east of the city, and successfully destroyed three 'Sallys' in just four minutes.

This was the first time Japanese planes were intercepted over Calcutta. When I interviewed 93-year-old Sri Sen, who was a teenager at the time, his eyes lit up as he recalled the incident. Even today, people who remember that time mention Pring by name, and remember his heroics. Pring's photograph was in the newspapers, and was used on recruitment posters, above the slogan: "A cool nerve, a clear brain, and unlimited 'guts', that's what it takes to make an ace pilot like Pring." He was feted in military and civil circles around the city, as well as by locals.

When the Japanese returned on 5 December 1943, they came at noon. Among those flyers sent up to intercept them was Pring. He was hit, and his plane went up in flames. There was no sign of a parachute. His body was eventually found, and he was laid to rest on 12 December 1943 in Bhowanipore Cemetery. It was a moment that provoked profound emotion in the city: Ron Walker, at the time a young boy whose father was in the Calcutta Police, recalled how everyone "cried unashamedly" at Pring's death.

Still today, that one young man who died in the Second World War is remembered by those who lived in Calcutta back then, his grave cared for in a quiet corner of the city, a long way from home. H

A Mitsubishi Ki-21, known as the 'Sally'. Arthur Maurice Pring destroyed three of these Japanese bombers over Kolkata in January 1943

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LETTERS

The 15th-century manor house Hergest Court was said to be home to a hound that may now haunt Herefordshire

LETTER OF THE MONTH

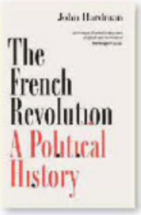
The rightful king

I enjoyed reading the interesting article by Caitlin Ellis on the rivals for the throne in 1066 (October). In particular, it was fascinating to read about Edgar Ætheling's claim, which was surely the strongest, based on pure bloodline. But other factors were considered, too, by the Witan (king's council) in those days, and bloodline by itself was no guarantee of success. The ability to command respect through leadership and bravery on the battlefield were also required characteristics, along with the support of the leading nobles. With England facing external threats and with Harold's proven ability on the battlefield, there was only really one choice for them.

Edgar was too young and inexperienced; Harald Hardrada was surely just a chancer out to get what he could; and William was a 'foreigner'. Edward the Confessor had caused tension by bringing to England Norman advisors in his reign, and there is no way the Witan would have wanted a Norman duke as king when 'their' man Harold was willing and able. Personally, I believe that Harold should have prevailed at Hastings if only he had listened to his brother's wise counsel and delayed the confrontation. That is another story, of course!

Edward Yeats-Brown, Westerham

Edward Yeats-Brown believes that Harold II – shown in a coin from 1066 – was the obvious choice as Edward the Confessor's successor



We reward the Letter of the Month writer with a copy of a new book. This issue, that's **The French Revolution: A Political History** by John Hardman. Read our review on page 72

Hair and the dog

I enjoyed the article on ghost dogs by Karen R Jones (November) but was surprised to read in the caption beneath the image of the film poster for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* that "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was inspired by tales of ghostly dogs on Dartmoor".

I live in the Welsh Marches and most people here believe that Conan Doyle's inspiration came from a different source. He and his first wife were friendly with the Baskervilles of Clyro Court near Hay-on-Wye. About 9 miles away is Hergest Ridge, part of the Offa's Dyke Walk. The 15th-century manor house of Hergest Court was once the home of Sir Thomas Vaughan, who was killed fighting for Edward IV at the battle of Edgcote in the Wars of the Roses.

In legend, Sir Thomas was known as 'Black Vaughan', supposedly because of his wicked deeds, but it is more likely that 'black' refers to his hair. Sir Thomas was supposed to have taken his hound, Arawn, to the battle with him and there are legends of a frightening ghost hound with this name. There are also legends of the Black Dog of Hergest which, even now, reportedly still roams on Hergest Ridge and around the town of Kington where his master is buried.

It may be that Conan Doyle chose to locate his story on Dartmoor to avoid too much invasive interest in the Hay-on-Wye area – and, of course, Dartmoor was a suitable setting for such an eerie story.

Elizabeth Holley, Herefordshire

In defence of dates

I must challenge Robert Blackmore on his views about learning historical dates (*Think Piece*, November). They are vital. They are pegs on which to hang historical events and people. How can you understand historical societies if you don't know when they happened?

Modern society has become very lazy in learning anything: tables, poetry, geography, history. They just have to fiddle with their phones to be given info to empty brains. A history graduate once asked me if the Normans came before the Romans!

I am a retired non-academic, but an enthusiastic amateur historian and I always want to know the dates of everything I am studying so I can slot the events into a social context. I didn't sit down and learn them; I absorbed them through continual study. Maybe the teaching emphasis is all wrong: not, this is the date and here is the event; but, here is the event and this is the date.

Maureen Davis, Oxford

Fake news and a fake identity

Thank you for Mike Rapport's excellent article about the Dreyfus case (November). After he fled to England, the real culprit in the case, Major Ferdinand Esterhazy, settled in the Hertfordshire town of Harpenden where he lived an unremarkable life until his death in 1923. His imposing gravestone may be seen there in the churchyard of St Nicholas, though he is commemorated under the false name and title of "Count de Voilement". Many years later an anonymous visitor paid to have the gravestone cleaned and refurbished. Esterhazy was descended from the noble Hungarian family of that name.

Stephen Halliday, Cambridge

SAVE WHEN YOU SUBSCRIBE TODAY
› Page 34

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Wise beyond their years

I read with interest in October's issue Julie V Gottlieb's article on the voting age (*Conversation*). Her concluding question about age being just a number is a valid one. There are some very politically immature adults and some very politically mature young people.

A case in point was when, as a history teacher, a class of 16-year-olds and I were discussing the growth of democracy in the United Kingdom from the Great Reform Act of 1832 to the Representation of the People Act of 1928. Two pupils asked what I thought about the recent change in the voting age allowing 16-year-olds to vote in Scottish elections. I thought that 16-year-olds would not be mature enough to vote, but I passed the question back to them as I could not let my personal political feelings be made known. The two 16-year-olds then declared that they would not be voting in the upcoming elections as they knew little about the politics of the day. Mature or what?

Alex J Thomson, South Lanarkshire

Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy may have been the true culprit in the Dreyfus affair but, as Stephen Halliday points out, he died in anonymity in England

Quite late and Bristol fashion

When I read your *Star Witness* article (November), I remembered reading a fact about the 1852 time change that is worth mentioning. Apparently not every person in Britain felt comfortable changing from local time to London-based time. Indeed, one man (possibly an important person from Bristol) spent the rest of his life being 14 minutes late for everything!

Iain Doherty, Solihull

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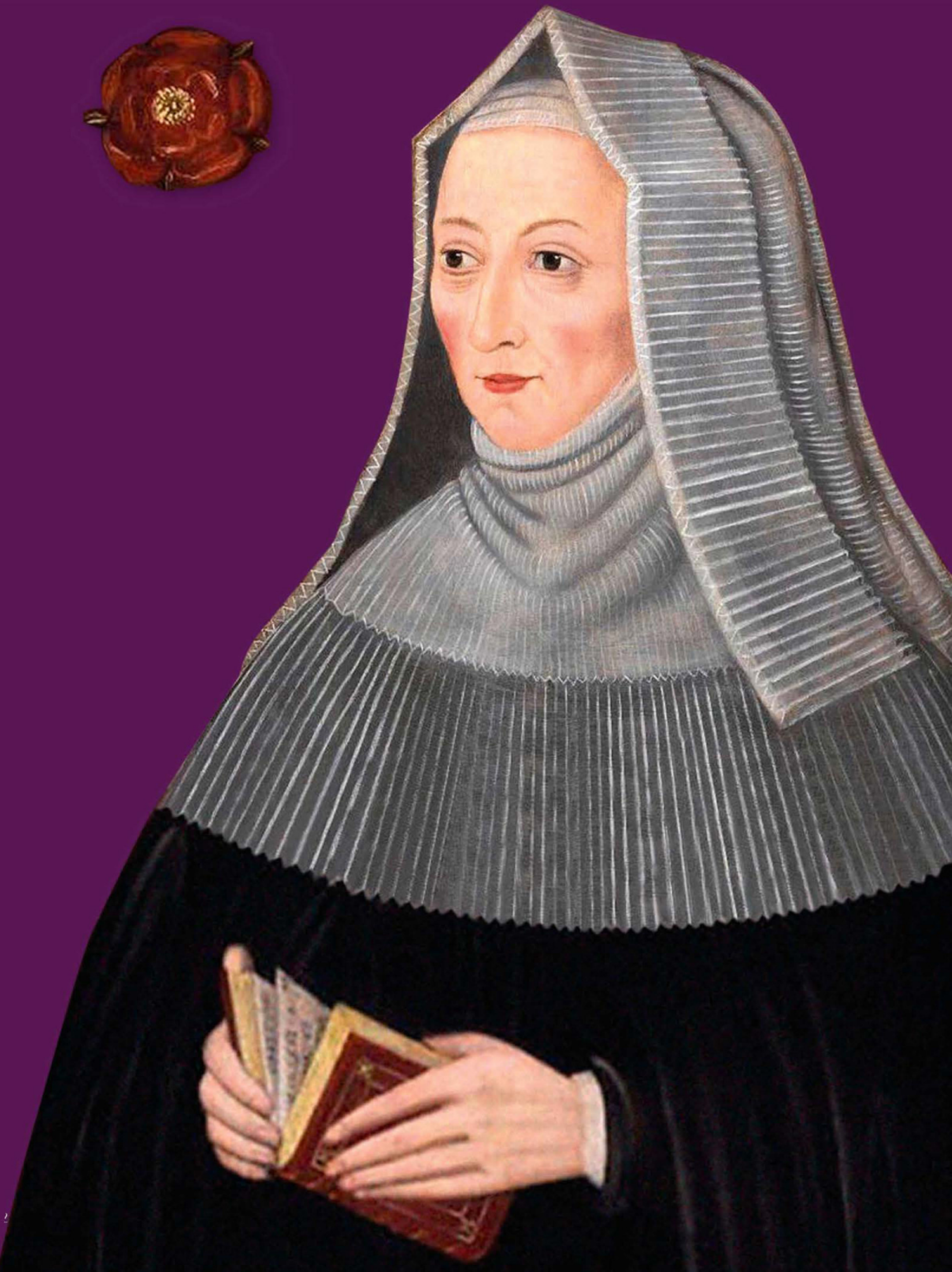


Maternal ambition
A painting of Margaret Beaufort. Despite being separated from her son, Henry Tudor, for many years, she battled to secure his inheritance as Earl of Richmond – and, ultimately, king of England

ALAMY

Margaret Beaufort Schemer or opportunist?

The mother of Henry VII is often characterised as a domineering woman who plotted her son's rise to the throne. But how true is that depiction? **Lauren Johnson** explores the life of the founding matriarch of the Tudor dynasty

In March 1457, a short, slight widow left Pembroke Castle to embark on a 100-mile journey across territories stalked by civil war and pestilence. Her husband had died only four months earlier, carried off by plague contracted during imprisonment at another Welsh castle during the spurts of Yorkist resistance that marked the early Wars of the Roses. It was just weeks since she had given birth – a traumatic labour, endured without her family or support network. But she set out now to Newport with a firm sense of purpose. She would protect herself in one of the only ways a woman could at that time: by finding another husband.

This widow and mother was Margaret Beaufort. She was 13 years old.

The newborn she left at Pembroke would, in 1485, become King Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch. Reading history backwards, it has become fashionable to portray Margaret as an obsessive, Machiavellian mother so consumed by the idea of her son's divine right to the throne that she would commit child murder to bring it about. She, it is insinuated, was the true assassin of the princes in the Tower who threatened the claim of her "good and gracious prince, king and only beloved son". But this interpretation is entirely fictional, and mired in misogynist oversimplification. Margaret did not aspire to a crown, either for her son or herself, until the unprecedented events of the Wars of the Roses made it essential for their survival.

Child bride

The notion that Margaret's child might inherit the throne would have been laughable in 1457. The king then was Henry VI (a Lancastrian), who had a healthy son and myriad cousins sharing his royal blood. In contrast, the Beauforts were products of an illicit liaison generations back between a Lancastrian prince and his children's governess. And, though in later life Margaret and her son were close both personally and politically, for much of Henry's youth her maternal style can best be described as 'hands off' – arguably, emotionally neglectful. Little wonder, given the circumstances of Henry's birth.

Today we would consider Margaret a victim of child abuse. Her marriage to Henry's father, Edmund Tudor, Earl of Richmond, took place when she was about 12 – the age of consent for medieval girls (for boys it was 14.) This was her second marriage, her first having been dissolved in 1453, during a period of political turmoil.

Even in the 15th century, when marriages were arranged for cradle-bound babies, it was highly unusual for unions to be consummated before a bride was 16, and 20 was the average age of first pregnancy for most noblewomen. For good reason: medieval women's bodies were still developing until then, and early childbirth was far likelier to end in stillbirth, maternal death or physically damaging complications. In later life, Margaret's confessor, John Fisher, alluded to how underdeveloped Margaret had been when she gave birth, writing: "She is… a woman not of a great stature, but at that time it is said she was much smaller still, to such a degree that it almost seemed a miracle at her age that so little a body could bring forth a child at all."

Margaret was forced into motherhood so that her husband could claim her considerable inheritance. Her father had died before her first birthday, leaving her an heiress worth, in modern terms, hundreds of thousands of pounds a year – and with a distant royal claim that had seen her welcomed to court as the king's "right well-beloved cousin". Ironically, Edmund Tudor died before his child was born, leaving Margaret to face childbirth alone, half a kingdom away from her family, whose main seat was in Lincolnshire.

Given the trauma of this experience, it is understandable that Margaret left her baby as soon as was physically possible and set out to regain control of her life. Barely three months after leaving Pembroke Castle, she was betrothed again; before her son's first birthday, Margaret remarried and moved back to Lincolnshire. Henry's wardship was granted to his uncle, Jasper Tudor, and later to the Yorkist William Herbert. Henry would remain in the care of these Welsh lords, 300 miles from his mother, until he was 14.

Meanwhile, Margaret – still not yet 15 – was on her third marriage. She had reasserted the security torn from her by the marriage to Edmund Tudor. Her new husband, Sir Harry Stafford, was at least a decade older than her, but respectful and affectionate. Their household accounts show the couple working and travelling together, with thoughtful exchanges of anniversary and New Year gifts. In his will, Harry called Margaret his "best beloved wife".

> **It has become fashionable to portray Margaret as an obsessive, Machiavellian mother**

Margaret was welcomed with open arms by the Stafford clan, especially Harry's politically astute mother, Anne, Duchess of Buckingham, who took "my daughter Richmond" under her wing and protected her interests at court. Most happily of all for Margaret, the Stafford marriage brought her back to her own adored mother and half-siblings, close to the estates where she had grown up. It must almost have felt to Margaret as if the last few terrible years – encompassing marriage, widowhood and childbirth – had never happened.

Distant mother

It was not unusual for medieval children to grow up apart from their parents, but it is noteworthy – given that both Margaret and Henry grew up without fathers – that, whereas she lived with her mother until adolescence, she left her son shortly after birth. And though there is little surviving evidence for the first decade of Henry's life, it is unclear if mother and son were in contact. Margaret did not return to Wales for almost a decade. Perhaps she rationalised that she was acting in her son's interests; he was a boy, in need of male role models. Given the violent turbulence of this period, though, it is significant that Margaret kept her distance.

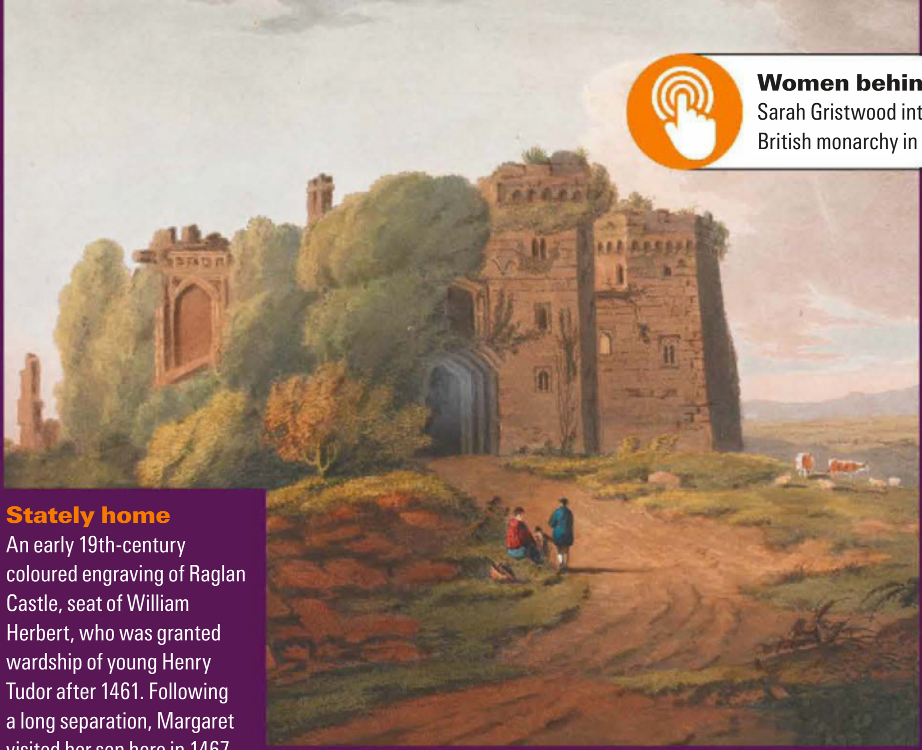
She had chosen her alliance with the Staffords because, with civil war looming, they represented a dominant, stabilising force. But even they could not keep the incompetent Henry VI on his throne. In March 1461, he was deposed in favour of his charismatic young kinsman, Edward of York.

Margaret and her relatives quickly came to terms with the new king, Edward IV, but her brother-in-law, Jasper Tudor, was a diehard Lancastrian whose rebellions incited Yorkist reprisals. Pembroke Castle was besieged, with Margaret's son, Henry, inside. Fortunately, as titular Earl of Richmond, Henry was a valuable commodity. His life was spared and his wardship granted to a leading Welsh Yorkist, William Herbert. There is no sign that Margaret protested; perhaps she could not cope emotionally with the responsibility of mothering a child after enduring so much at such a young age.

Mother and son would not meet again until Henry was 10. The causes of their parting and ultimate reunion probably stemmed from the same root: Margaret hoped that she and Harry Stafford would have children of their own. But Henry's birth had scarred her physically and psychologically, and as years passed it became clear that he would be her only child. Only when confronted with this realisation did Margaret

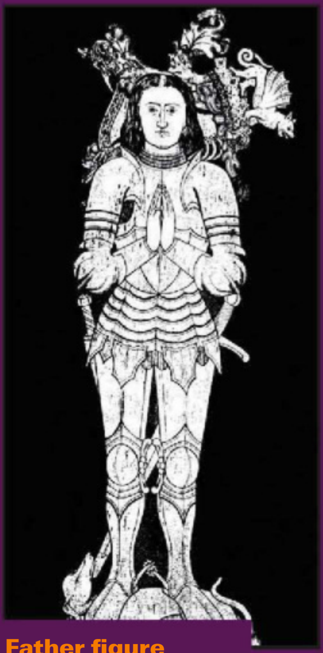
Women behind the Wars of the Roses

Sarah Gristwood introduces the powerhouses whose actions shaped the British monarchy in our online article: *historyextra.com/wotr-women*



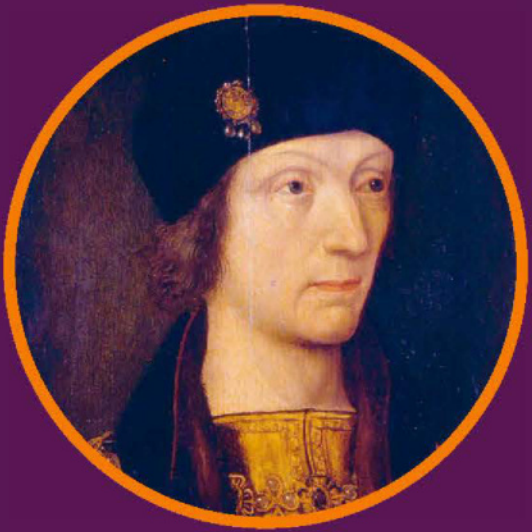
Stately home

An early 19th-century coloured engraving of Raglan Castle, seat of William Herbert, who was granted wardship of young Henry Tudor after 1461. Following a long separation, Margaret visited her son here in 1467



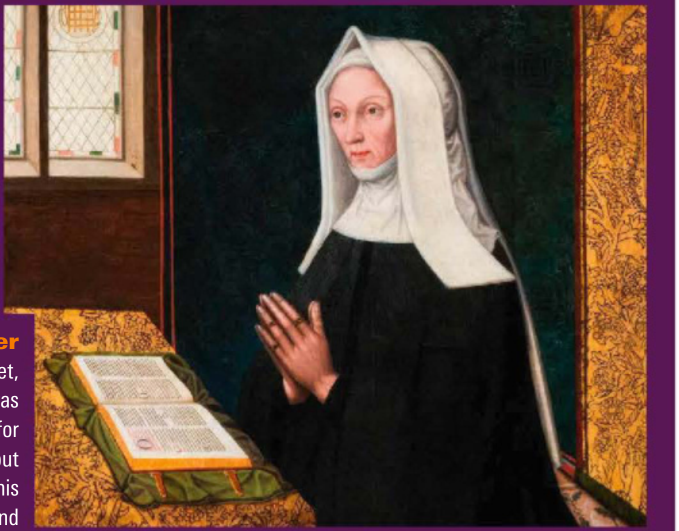
Father figure

An illustration of the 19th-century brass tomb effigy of Edmund Tudor at St David's Cathedral. He died before his son, Henry, was born, leaving Margaret a young widow



Rising son

A 16th-century portrait of Henry VII. He inherited his mother's quick brain – and a claim to the throne



Superior mother

A portrait of Margaret, painted c1510. She was apart from her son for most of his young life, but strove to restore his earldom of Richmond

GETTY IMAGES/SUDELEY CASTLE/ALAMY BRIDGEMAN/TOPFOTO/ALAMY/WIKIPEDIA (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

belatedly seek to re-establish a relationship with her son. In September 1467, she returned to Wales for the first time since her remarriage, spending a week with Henry at Raglan Castle. He had grown tall and serious, with her capacity for quick learning. Perhaps she saw in his appearance and character glimpses of herself or her half-siblings – and perhaps, less comfortably, of Edmund Tudor.

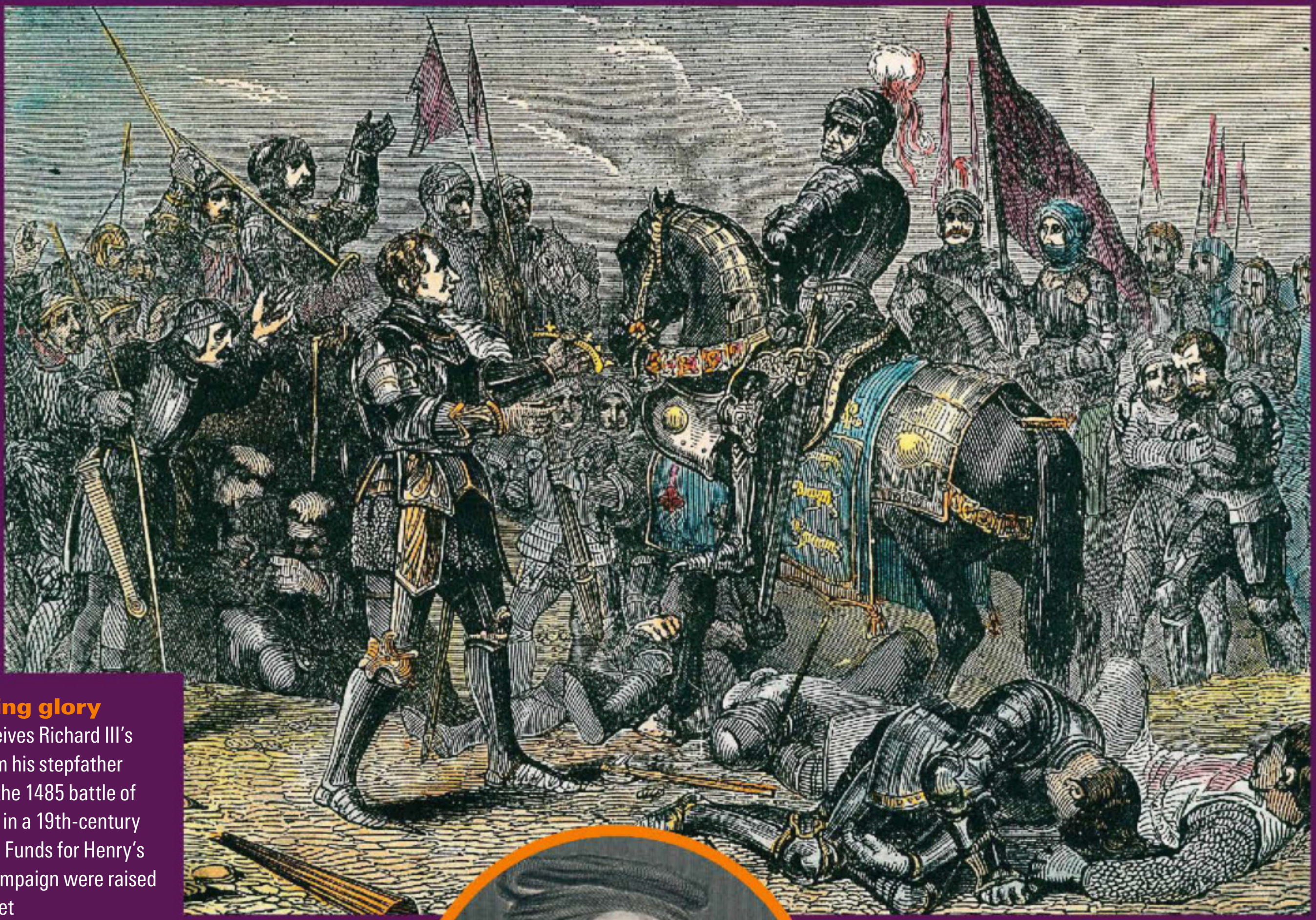
The visit to Raglan marked the beginning of Margaret's self-identity as Henry's mother, but she was no closer to taking physical possession of her child. Two years later, after another outbreak of civil war, she attempted to regain legal control of her son. When William Herbert was executed after the battle of Edgecote in 1469, Margaret struggled to assemble lost legal documents; to reassert her guardianship of Henry, she convened assignations in the manor houses of aristocrats, and with lawyers in alehouses. Mother and son were reunited briefly in 1470, touring London and Surrey together, indulging their shared love of hunting. Presumably they discussed Margaret's hope of regaining Henry's birthright, which had been stripped from him and parcelled out to leading Yorkists – not the crown, which was still entirely outside her aspirations, but the earldom of Richmond.

Dangerous blood

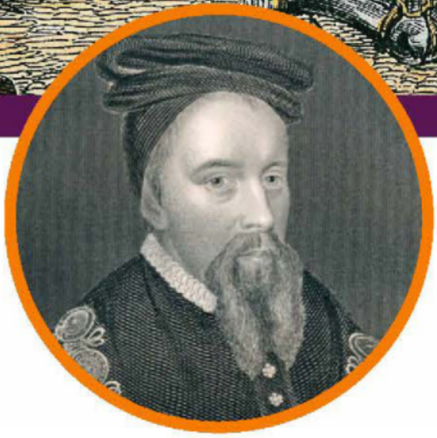
The same forces that reunited Margaret and Henry also drove them apart. The internecine chaos unleashed on England in 1469 was finally resolved in 1471, when Edward IV conclusively vanquished his rivals in battle. Henry VI and his teenage son were killed. So, too, were several of Margaret's Beaufort cousins and, within a few years, even Edward's Lancastrian former brother-in-law, the Duke of Exeter. Suddenly, the possession of Lancastrian blood, no matter how thin, was dangerous. According to the Tudor poet Bernard André, Margaret advised Henry to flee into exile with his uncle Jasper: "Unless my imagination or maternal instinct deceives me… [Henry's] life will be safer on the ocean's waves than in this tempest on land."

In September 1471, Henry and Jasper sought asylum in Brittany, where they remained until 1483. Meanwhile, Margaret was left in limbo. Alive to the dangers inherent in Henry's distant royal claim and traditional family loyalties, she warned him not to return to England until she had assurances for his safety. Mother and son could communicate only through intermediaries, trusted servants who braved the Channel crossing.

Margaret demonstrated a profound sense of responsibility to Henry. The rightful Earl of Richmond was heir to a proud inheritance



Crowning glory
Henry receives Richard III's crown from his stepfather following the 1485 battle of Bosworth, in a 19th-century engraving. Funds for Henry's military campaign were raised by Margaret



Supportive stepfather
Northern magnate Thomas Stanley, who married Margaret Beaufort in 1472, shown in an engraving of a Holbein portrait. Having opposed Richard III, he and his family played a key role in bringing Henry to the throne

and, as any medieval aristocrat would, she fervently believed that her son should claim it.

But it wasn't until 1482, when Henry was 25, that making such a claim seemed possible. The death of her mother, and the ensuing business of settling her estate, enabled Margaret to cut a deal with Edward IV to bring Henry home safely. On 3 June 1482, Edward and Margaret publicly agreed that, if Henry returned "in the grace and favour of the king's highness", he could claim his grandmother's substantial West Country estates. An undated pardon now in the archives of Westminster Abbey suggests that this may have been a precursor to the restoration of Henry's earldom.

More privately – though loud enough that several leading courtiers later reported it – Margaret and Edward discussed how they were "related in the fourth… degrees of kindred". This was almost certainly the first step in arranging a marriage between Henry and one of Edward's daughters which, because of their relation, would demand a papal dispensation. Margaret, always less risk-averse than the men in her life, was willing to gamble her son's life for this bright future. Unfortunately, 11 years of political exile had left Henry paranoid, and even these substantial guarantees did not convince him that he would be safe. He refused to return.

Margaret was linked by blood, marriage and loyalty to most of the nobility of the realm

Then political upheaval simultaneously dashed Margaret's careful plans and enabled her to contemplate a future for her son that would have previously been inconceivable.

Maternal kingmaker

Margaret's hopes of regaining Henry's Richmond inheritance were thwarted when, in April 1483, Edward IV died unexpectedly. With two adolescent sons, Edward's dynasty should have been assured. Instead, his brother Richard detained those young princes and claimed the throne himself. A contemporary eyewitness reported that the princes "were withdrawn into the inner apartments of the Tower proper, and day by day began to be seen more rarely behind the bars and windows, until at length they ceased to appear altogether". It was rumoured that Richard had murdered them.

For Margaret, like much of the English nobility, Richard's accession was an unanticipated complication. Her hoped-for marriage between Henry and a Yorkist princess was dead in the water, and the princesses had fled into sanctuary. Moreover, after Harry Stafford's death in 1471, Margaret had remarried the northern lord Thomas Stanley, whose family were stalwarts of the regimes of Edward IV and his son. Over the years, the

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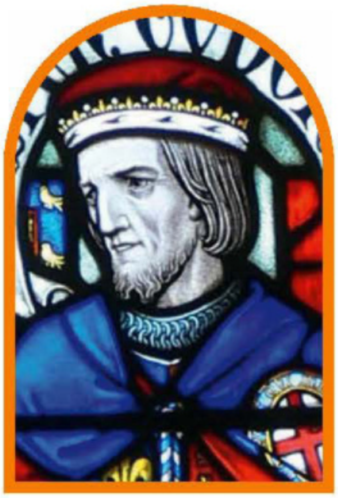


Uncle in exile
Jasper Tudor, depicted in stained glass in Cardiff Castle, accompanied Henry into exile for more than a decade

Stanleys had had several ugly confrontations with Richard. Indeed, Stanley was briefly arrested during Richard's coup.

A pragmatist above all else, Stanley soon came to terms with Richard and so, apparently, did Margaret. But the circumstances of Richard's accession had entirely changed the political landscape. Disaffected opponents plotted rebellion, and Margaret – whose territories stretched from Flintshire to Lincolnshire, Surrey to Devon – had myriad connections through whom she gained intelligence about these nascent conspiracies.

The anti-Ricardians were a disparate band. There were servants of Edward IV who hated his queen's Woodville relatives; the Woodvilles themselves, fearing reprisals; attendants of the lost princes, jealous of missed opportunities or genuinely concerned for their charges; even Lancastrian stalwarts who wanted rid of the Yorkists altogether.

Their very heterogeneity was a boon to Margaret. If the princes were dead – and by August it seemed they must be – then the rebellion needed a new figurehead. It needed to be an adult with royal blood and no loyalty to Richard – and, because they would have to fight for the crown, a male. Most of all, it needed to be someone impartial enough to unify these factions. In short: Henry Tudor. The exceptional circumstances of summer 1483 made it possible for the first time for Margaret to hope not merely for her son's return but for his accession as king.

A lifetime of political and economic activity had readied her for this moment. Even the collapse of their first rebellion in autumn 1483, which left Margaret under house arrest and deprived of her fortune, could not cow her. She was linked by blood, marriage and loyalty not only to most of the nobility of the realm but also to the working men and women who served them. Her vast network of connections can be read in her memberships of religious guilds, gifts and letters exchanged with neighbours, favours recorded in her household accounts, payments to merchants and craftsmen who provided for her husbands and family, and in many more ways – scarcely tangible then and almost entirely lost now.

The loyalty of these associates to Margaret was longer-standing, and more immediately beneficial, than their allegiance to Richard III. When Margaret mobilised her network, she was able to gather considerable sums of money – and money meant weapons and manpower for Henry, which he used to invade and then defeat Richard in battle at Bosworth.

Thus the mother who had been absent from her son's life for so long was essential to the success of the campaign that won him the throne. Margaret enabled Henry to be crowned Henry VII in 1485 – and so to re-enter her life and build a close, lasting relationship. In an undated letter as king, son told mother: "I am as much bound [to you] as any creature living, for the great and singular motherly love and affection that it hath pleased you at all times to bear towards me."

Perhaps Margaret had not shown that affection "at all times" – mother and son both had a habit of rewriting their pasts to better suit their present circumstances. But, after a long, difficult journey, they ultimately built a relationship that proved unbreakable.

Lauren Johnson is a historian specialising in the 15th and early 16th centuries. Her new book, *Margaret Beaufort: Survivor, Rebel, Kingmaker*, is published by Apollo in November

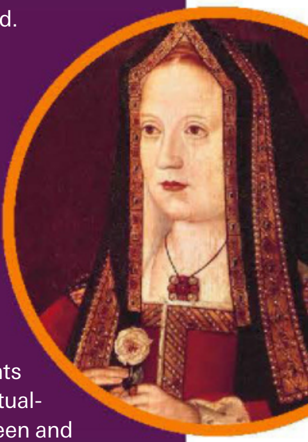
Hear Greg Jenner and guests discuss the rise of the Tudors on **You're Dead to Me:** *bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0fk5v2p*

Mother-in-law from hell?

After claiming the crown at Bosworth, Henry wed **Elizabeth of York** (right), daughter of Edward IV, helping to heal dynastic rifts. The myth goes that Margaret was the ideal mother but a nightmare mother-in-law, so power-crazed that **she even directed how her daughter-in-law must give birth**. This idea is founded on a book of ordinances (rules for the royal household) attributed to Margaret by an 18th-century antiquarian, but there is no evidence that she wrote them.

Other contemporary writings have also been misunderstood. In 1498, three Spanish ambassadors reported that "the Queen [Elizabeth] is a very noble woman, and much beloved [but] she is kept in subjection by the mother of the King." However, it is not certain that those writers actually met either woman. Stopping only briefly in London, the ambassadors probably padded their reports with rumours, and their claims were tainted by jealousy.

They sought to undermine their rival Rodrigo De Puebla, then pre-eminent in English affairs, who was close to Elizabeth. **By insinuating that the queen was powerless**, De Puebla's enemies made his carefully fostered relationship appear self-serving and futile. De Puebla himself, who observed the two royal women first-hand, never represented their dynamic as problematic, and nor did other European agents in England.



There is a powerful strand of misogyny to such claims – an interpretation of female relationships that persists today: that powerful women cannot coexist. But the (albeit sparse) evidence testifies to mutual respect and affection between Margaret and Elizabeth. Official documents and private letters refer, virtually in one breath, to "the queen and king's mother". They jointly founded a chantry chapel, and intervened to protect the royal children. After Elizabeth endured a difficult childbirth in 1496, Margaret wrote that the queen's health was not "so good as I would [wish], but I trust heartily it shall [be soon] with God's grace".

We do Elizabeth an injustice when we interpret her conservative queenship as a passive infliction rather than a pragmatic choice. She had lost many relatives in the Wars of the Roses, and saw the danger of promoting political agendas. Such shared trauma was a further connection between her and Margaret – another chain in a strong bond between two royal women who backed and shaped Henry's reign.

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Spain's miracle

The nation's transition from dictatorship to democracy in the late 1970s surely counts as one of modern Europe's most remarkable stories. On the 50th anniversary of General Franco's death, **Paul Preston** explores how pluralism arose from the ashes of tyranny

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POLITICAL MAELSTROM

① Supporters of Herri Batasuna, considered the political wing of the armed Basque separatist group ETA, march through the town of Irun, 1978

② Prime minister Carlos Arias Navarro (left) with the ailing General Franco in 1973

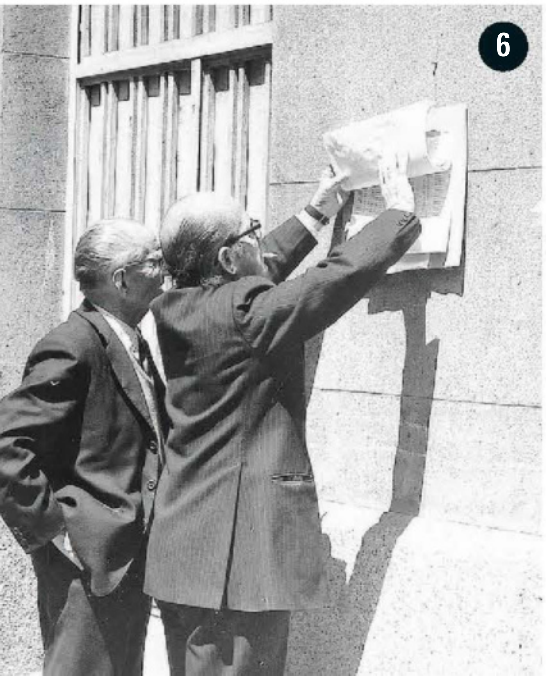
③ Police move a car shortly after the assassination of Franco henchman Luis Carrero Blanco in Madrid, December 1973

④ Republican militia on the march at the start of the Spanish Civil War, 1936

⑤ Members of the extreme nationalist Falange movement during a victory parade following the invasion of Barcelona in March 1939

⑥ Madrid residents check if they are on the electoral lists in June 1977, on the eve of Spain's first free poll since 1936

⑦ As the Spanish parliament looks on,
Juan Carlos takes the oath of office
as General Franco's successor, 1969



When General Francisco Franco died on 20 November 1975 – 39 years after the start of the brutal civil war that brought him to power – the prospect of a bloodless transition to democracy in Spain appeared vanishingly small. Franco had prepared a rigid framework to guarantee the permanence of the dictatorship over which he had ruled with an iron fist for almost four decades. Spain teetered on the edge of bloodshed and chaos, with powerful groups at the political extremes ferociously opposed to compromise.

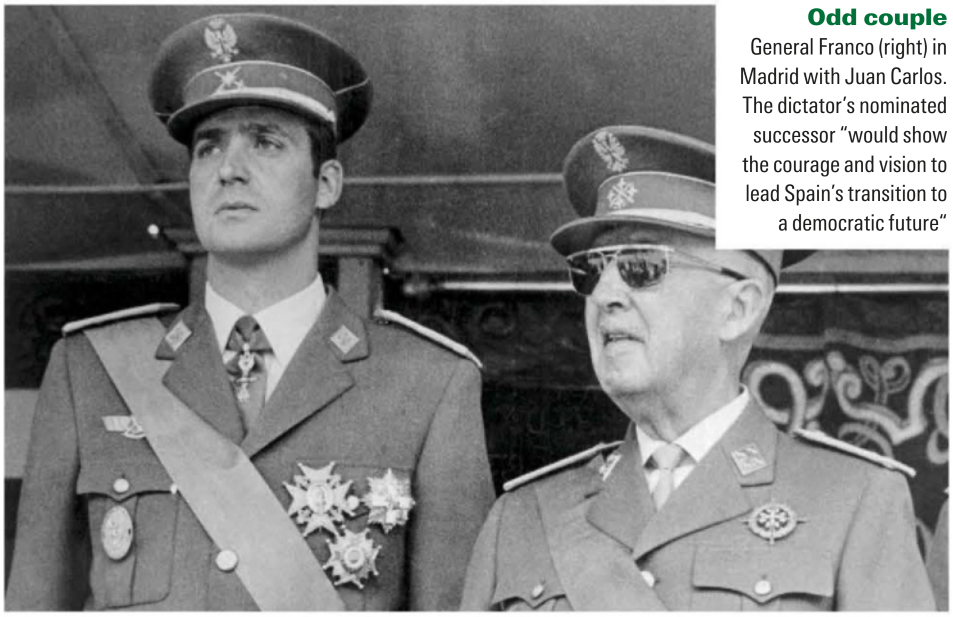
And so, as *El Caudillo* ('The Leader') was buried in the vast Valley of the Fallen memorial just outside Madrid – acclaimed by tens of thousands of blue-shirted supporters – few commentators would have predicted a future of pluralism and relative peace. Yet that's exactly what was achieved. That the Spanish people were, over the next 10 years, able to negotiate a perilous path towards democracy through the minefields laid by Franco himself – and the ambushes set by terrorists of both right and left – counts as an extraordinary achievement. Even from a distance of 50 years, it surely ranks among modern Europe's most remarkable stories. So how did it happen?

Blurring the past

To answer that question we must rewind to the end of the Second World War. Terror had underpinned Franco's regime from the moment he was propelled to power at the end of the 1930s. But defeat for the Axis powers in 1945 shattered his initial plans for a fascist future – one in which Europe was dominated by authoritarian regimes. Franco realised that he needed to end Spain's international ostracism in the postwar period and be incorporated into the western community. To achieve that, a new approach was required.

And so, to blur the Spanish dictator's Axis past, a scheme was devised by his crony, naval captain Luis Carrero Blanco, to perpetuate the regime behind a monarchist facade. The Law of Succession of 26 July 1947 established Spain as a kingdom with Franco as its head of state. Franco would govern as regent until prevented by death or incapacity – and he had the right to nominate his own royal successor.

The dictator didn't name that successor immediately. In fact, it wasn't until July 1969 that Franco announced to the world the identity of the man who would become head of state following his death. That man was Juan Carlos – grandson of Alfonso XIII, king of Spain from 1886 to 1931. This would not be a



Odd couple General Franco (right) in Madrid with Juan Carlos. The dictator's nominated successor "would show the courage and vision to lead Spain's transition to a democratic future"

Tough start Juan Carlos presides at the first cabinet meeting after Franco's death, December 1975. His inbox would soon include terrorism, industrial unrest, and an army that simmered with discontent

LA VOZ DE MADRID

Master mind Juan Carlos's one-time tutor, Torcuato Fernández-Miranda (right, in 1969), introduced the legal reforms that facilitated Spain's move to democracy

Spain teetered on the edge of chaos, with those on the political extremes ferociously opposed to compromise

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restoration of the legitimate royal family but the installation of a monarchy created by the Falangists – the far-right nationalist political group fronted by Franco. Juan Carlos would be compelled to uphold the fundamental laws of the regime, and could be removed if he strayed from them. As such, he was very much at the regime's mercy. And yet, though no one knew it at the time, he would show the courage and vision to lead Spain's transition to a democratic future.

In the late 1960s, that future lay some way off. Franco was still very much alive. By now, the dictator had delegated day-to-day administration of the regime to Carrero Blanco, an appointment that, rather than consolidate the regime, merely accelerated its disintegration. Facing an inexorable rise in working-class and student dissent and the armed opposition of the Basque separatist terrorist organisation, ETA, Carrero intensified repression, employing neo-Nazi organisations, off-duty policemen and civil guards to do his dirty work. It was a strategy that poisoned relations with the Basques, the clergy and workers, and fomented disquiet among the most perceptive elements of the regime.

It also made him a target for assassination. On 20 December 1973, Carrero was blown up in Madrid by a bomb planted by four ETA operatives. Things got little better under his successor, Carlos Arias Navarro. In fact, an early trickle of defections under Carrero turned into a flood from 1974. With their country blighted by military interventionism, the virulence of the extreme right, violence in the Basque Country, obsolete industries and uneven development, moderates among the ranks of both the regime and the opposition were rapidly reaching the conclusion that only negotiation could prevent a bloodbath.

Franco's invading army

Yet those seeking compromise in the wake of Franco's death in November 1975 were confronted with seemingly insuperable obstacles – chief among them that, under Franco, Spain was governed as if it were a territory conquered by an invading army. The civil war had been provoked and fought by a coalition of rightwing forces to defend their sectoral interests against the reforming ambitions of the democratic Second Republic. Landowners, industrialists and bankers wanted to safeguard their economic privileges; the army to defend the centralised organisation of the Spanish state; and the church to retain its cultural hegemony. Each contributed to Franco's war effort, financially, militarily or ideologically.

The regime's long-term survival was facilitated by total control of the media and of what passed for an education system to implement a national brainwashing that fomented fear of the return of the 'reds'. After the civil war, these diverse forces of Francoism remained united by fear and by networks of corruption. Hardline Francoism was entrenched in the army, the police and the Civil Guard.

However, for those such as Juan Carlos seeking an alternative future for Spain, there were glimmers of opportunity. Mass demonstrations revealed an overwhelming popular urge for democracy. Juan Carlos knew that important sectors of Spanish capitalism saw the political apparatus of Francoism as an obstacle to growth. In opting boldly for progress, he would be following the advice of British, European and American leaders.

While Juan Carlos may have been the most high-profile figure in Spain's post-Franco reform project, he was far from the only politician seeking to transform the nation. In fact, the brains behind the operation can be said to be Juan Carlos's one-time tutor, Torcuato Fernández-Miranda, an expert in Francoist constitutional law. As president of the Cortes (Spain's parliament, which would have to ratify any reform scheme) and of the Council of the Kingdom (which had to endorse prime ministers), Fernández-Miranda would facilitate the 'legal' reform that was to be the real basis of the transition.

Fernández-Miranda also played a key role in the elevation, in the summer of 1976, to prime minister of the young liberal Falangist Adolfo Suárez. Albeit impelled down the road to democratisation by popular pressure (1976 saw violence, enormous demonstrations and industrial strikes sweep the country) Suárez would be the perfect man for the historic task of steering democratic reform through the Francoist institutions. It was he, more than any other figure, who convinced other politicians that the reform project was serious.

As for Juan Carlos, his contribution lay firstly in persuading major figures to join Suárez's cabinet. Secondly, by dint of constant journeys throughout Spain he generated support for reform and rode out the storm of opprobrium provoked by his nomination of Falangists like Suárez. Above all, by appearing in the uniform of commander-in-chief, and through his private meetings with officers, he neutralised the high command of the army and restrained military hostility to the democratic process.

In the autumn of 1976, with great skill, Suárez managed to steer Fernández-Miranda's astute reform project through the Francoist institutions. In mid-November, it was approved in the Cortes by a huge majority of its members, the largely unelected procuradores. Suárez later called it a collective suicide by the "procuradores del harakiri".

Juan Carlos made a considerable effort to make contact with members of the opposition

SURVIVING FRANCO

A timeline of the 40-year battle for the soul of Spain

1936–39
Nationalist forces headed by General Franco overthrow the Second Republic in the Spanish Civil War. Franco establishes a dictatorship that will endure until the 1970s.

26 July 1947
The Law of Succession establishes Spain as a kingdom with Franco as head of state. Franco has the right to nominate his successor.

July 1969
Franco announces the identity of his successor: Juan Carlos (pictured below right), grandson of King Alfonso XIII.

20 December 1973
Franco's prime minister Luis Carrero Blanco is assassinated by ETA.

20 November 1975
Franco dies. Juan Carlos becomes king and head of state.

5 July 1976
Adolfo Suárez becomes prime minister. Later that year, the Spanish parliament overwhelmingly approves his reform project.

15 June 1977
Suárez's UCD party secures victory in Spain's first free elections since 1936.

14 October 1977
An amnesty (see box, p33) passes into law effectively stating that crimes committed in support of, or opposition to, Franco's regime could not be subject to judicial proceedings.

23 February 1981
Rightwing army officers attempt a coup. After Juan Carlos tells them that he will neither abdicate nor leave Spain, the perpetrators are placed behind bars.

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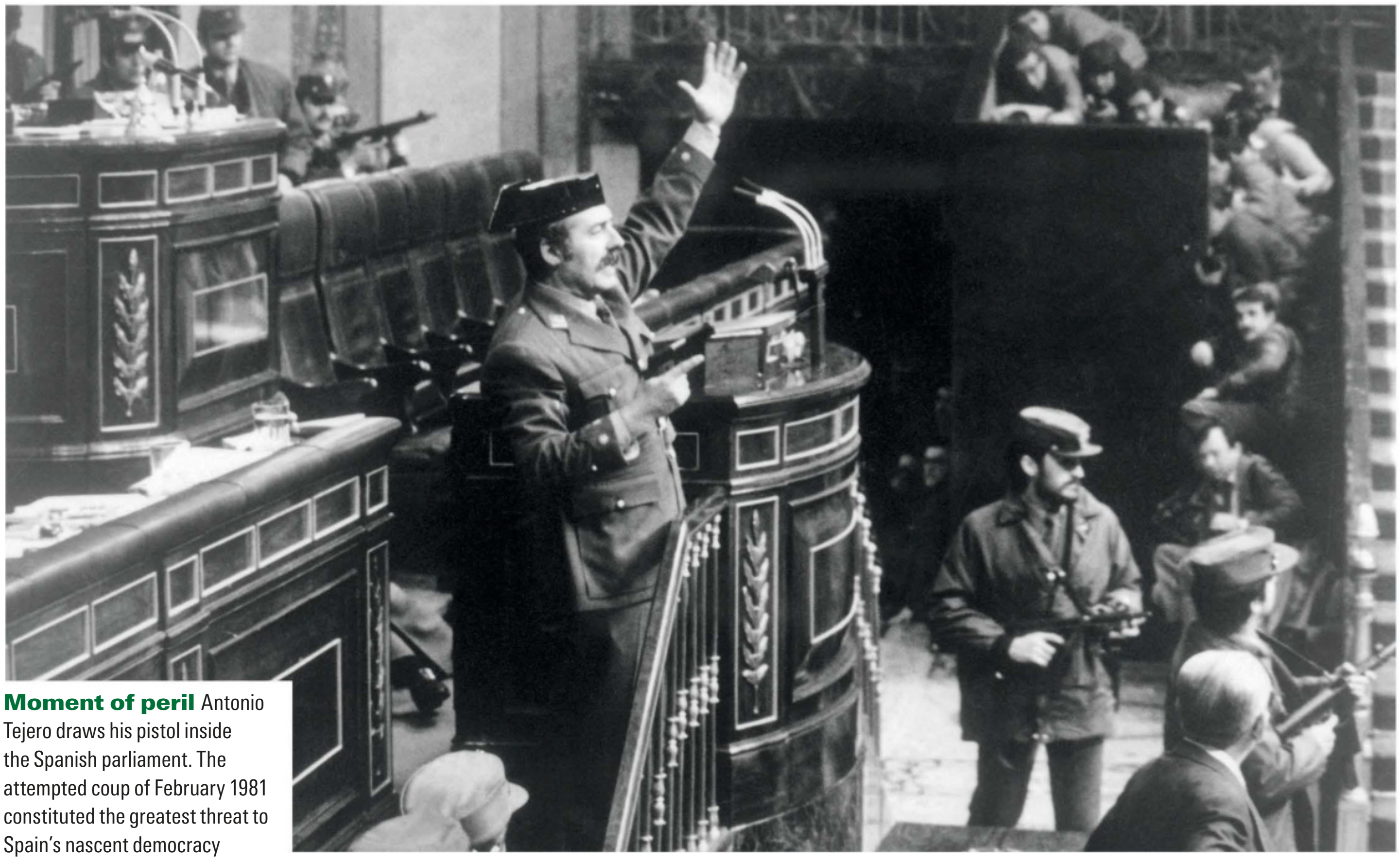

Moment of peril Antonio Tejero draws his pistol inside the Spanish parliament. The attempted coup of February 1981 constituted the greatest threat to Spain's nascent democracy

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to convince them of the need for moderation. This was rewarded on 15 December when the referendum on political reform saw the project approved by a majority of more than 90 per cent. The opposition's calls for abstention were ignored by the leftwing rank-and-file – a telling manifestation of popular readiness to make sacrifices to secure the basic framework of democracy. The referendum was a victory for Suárez but also for the mass pressure throughout 1976 that had pushed the government towards democratisation.

The trump card

With elections scheduled for June, Suárez needed to create a party. Convinced that his best chance of success lay with a centre party, Suárez cobbled together the Unión de Centro Democrático by exploiting the need of many small centre right parties for alliances. His trump card was government control of Radio-Television Española and of local administrative machinery. UCD fused five main groups, each in turn composed of several others, all desperate to be part of an electorally viable movement. Ideological and ethical considerations took a back seat.

Suárez's skilful use of the media was rewarded with victory. UCD won 165 seats in the new Cortes, followed by the Socialist PSOE (who enjoyed considerable international support) with 118. The Communist Party of Spain and rightwing Alianza Popular trailed way behind with 20 and 16 seats respectively.

The king told the coup leader that he would have to kill him to succeed. These words all but ended the putsch

But an essential part of the progress towards the elections also posed the greatest obstacle to the long-term consolidation of democracy. The legalisation of the Communist Party on 9 April confirmed the military's conviction that its job was less to defend Spain from external enemies and more to safeguard Franco's civil war victory.

This wasn't the only threat to the nascent democracy. From 1977 until 1982, on a monthly basis, Juan Carlos had to impose his authority as commander-in-chief of the armed forces on officers outraged because Suárez's minister of defence, General Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado, manoeuvred liberal officers into, and reactionaries out of, key positions. The situation was worsened by the relentless provocation of ETA's attacks on officers. The response of the ultras within the army was *golpismo* – conspiracy to restore the dictatorship. At frequent receptions for senior officers at his Zarzuela Palace and on tense visits to garrisons, Juan Carlos argued powerfully for unity and discipline.

Nevertheless, the crisis intensified and in late 1980 a plot was hatched to launch a military coup. The ex-secretary general of the royal household, General Alfonso Armada, persuaded other generals, most notably the Captain-General of Valencia, the ultra Jaime Milans del Bosch, that he had royal approval to instigate regime change.

At the end of January 1981, facing a revolt from within his own party as his popularity crumbled, Suárez resigned as prime minister. This left the king as the most visible guarantor of democracy but his meetings with Armada enabled the latter to give the impression of royal collusion in what was being plotted – and on 23 February, the plotters struck. Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero seized the entire Spanish political elite as they attended the Cortes investiture of a new cabinet under Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo, while Milans del Bosch ordered tanks into the streets of Valencia.

Alone with his immediate staff, the king courageously headed the operation to dismantle the coup. In the course of a tense night, he appeared on television insisting that he would uphold the constitution. He telephoned Milans, effectively informing him that he would have to kill him in order

Spain's great crisis You can hear Paul Preston answer listener questions on the Spanish Civil War at *HistoryExtra.com/podcast*

A SYMBOL OF RECONCILIATION

How an amnesty helped Spain confront its past, and its future

On 15 June 1977 something remarkable occurred across Spain: people went to the polls in free elections for the first time since 1936. With Adolfo Suárez's UCD party securing victory, the complex process of building a democracy could now begin. Yet how was this to be achieved without plunging Spain back into dictatorship or the horrors of another civil war? The widespread consensus was that sacrifices would have to be made – and that meant an amnesty.

On 14 October, that amnesty passed through Spain's parliament, the Cortes, into law. This hugely consequential piece of legislation effectively stated that acts of terrorism in opposition to the Franco dictatorship – which meant the sporadic guerrilla warfare of the 1940s and ETA terrorism – and the crimes against human rights in its defence, could not be subject to judicial proceedings. As such, it wiped the slate clean and rested on a tacit, collective agreement of the great majority of the Spanish people to renounce any settling of accounts with Franco's regime.

The public pressure for such an amnesty had been building for months – the previous year, 80,000 people had taken to the streets of Barcelona on successive Sundays to call for one. Yet the passing of the legislation was not without controversy. In early October, Suárez had met with representatives of all parties and warned them that the army, the banks and, to a lesser extent, the church had voiced their objections to an amnesty for political prisoners. That's why the law that passed through parliament excluded both army officers who had fought for the Republic during the civil war and those involved in the Unión Militar Democrática, a pressure group of liberal officers punished for trying to ensure that the army would not block democratic transformation.

Given the numerical discrepancy between the relatively few people involved in acts of violence against the regime and the many involved in its brutal imposition, the law required democratic forces to make a major sacrifice. It was also accompanied by the systematic destruction of the archives of the Franco regime's repressive apparatus.

Yet despite these issues, the amnesty – backed by a near-unanimous vote – seemed to symbolise reconciliation in a country that had been plagued by violence, bitterness and bloodshed for decades. As the basis of the 'pact of oblivion' (pacto del olvido) instituted across the political spectrum following Franco's death, it would be one of the pillars of the transition to democracy.

VOTE
LOS HOMBRES DE
UNION DE CENTRO DEMOCRATICO
Carlos Sentis
Jiménez de Parga
José Espinet
Vicenç Capdevila
Juan de Dios Ramirez Heredia
Guillermo Diaz Plaj
Esteban Negra Valls
José Antonio Torroja Cabanillas
UNION DE CENTRO DEMOCRATICO

A poster for Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez's UCD party in 1977, when Spain staged its first free elections since 1936

to succeed: "I swear to you that I will neither abdicate nor leave Spain." His intervention effectively ended the putsch. By the end of the month, the conspirators were in prison.

Plots to kill a king

In October 1982, the Socialists won a substantial victory in a new round of elections. From this moment forward, Juan Carlos no longer had to be called out as a 'fireman', and could act more as a constitutional head of state.

The twin problems of Basque terrorism and military subversion remained, and there were ETA plots to assassinate Juan Carlos in 1985, 1986, 1995 and 1997. What's more, the king still had to walk the tightrope of keeping both left and right onside – persuading the opposition that he would play a role in democratisation, while maintaining the support of Francoists by seeming to respect the constitutional laws on which, until 1977, his 'legitimacy' rested.

In this, it certainly helped that the king was a naturally affable type. A telling example derives from the period in 1978 when the new democratic constitution was being elaborated by a parliamentary commission, or *Ponencia*. There was a reception for the haughty French president Giscard d'Estaing, who was visiting Madrid. At one point, Juan Carlos sidled over to Miquel Roca i Junyent, a member of the *Ponencia*, and whispered: "Don't you think he looks more like a king than I do?"

Looks can be deceptive, of course. And from the nightmare that threatened to envelop Spain following Franco's death, the self-deprecating monarch and his colleagues had achieved something remarkable: they had successfully harnessed a people's collective determination never to face civil war and dictatorship again.

New dawn Adolfo Suárez votes at the election of 1982. This poll marked the moment when Juan Carlos no longer needed to act as the nation's 'fireman', writes Paul Preston

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

Paul Preston is a historian of the Spanish Civil War. His most recent book is *Perfidious Albion: Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Clapton, 2024)

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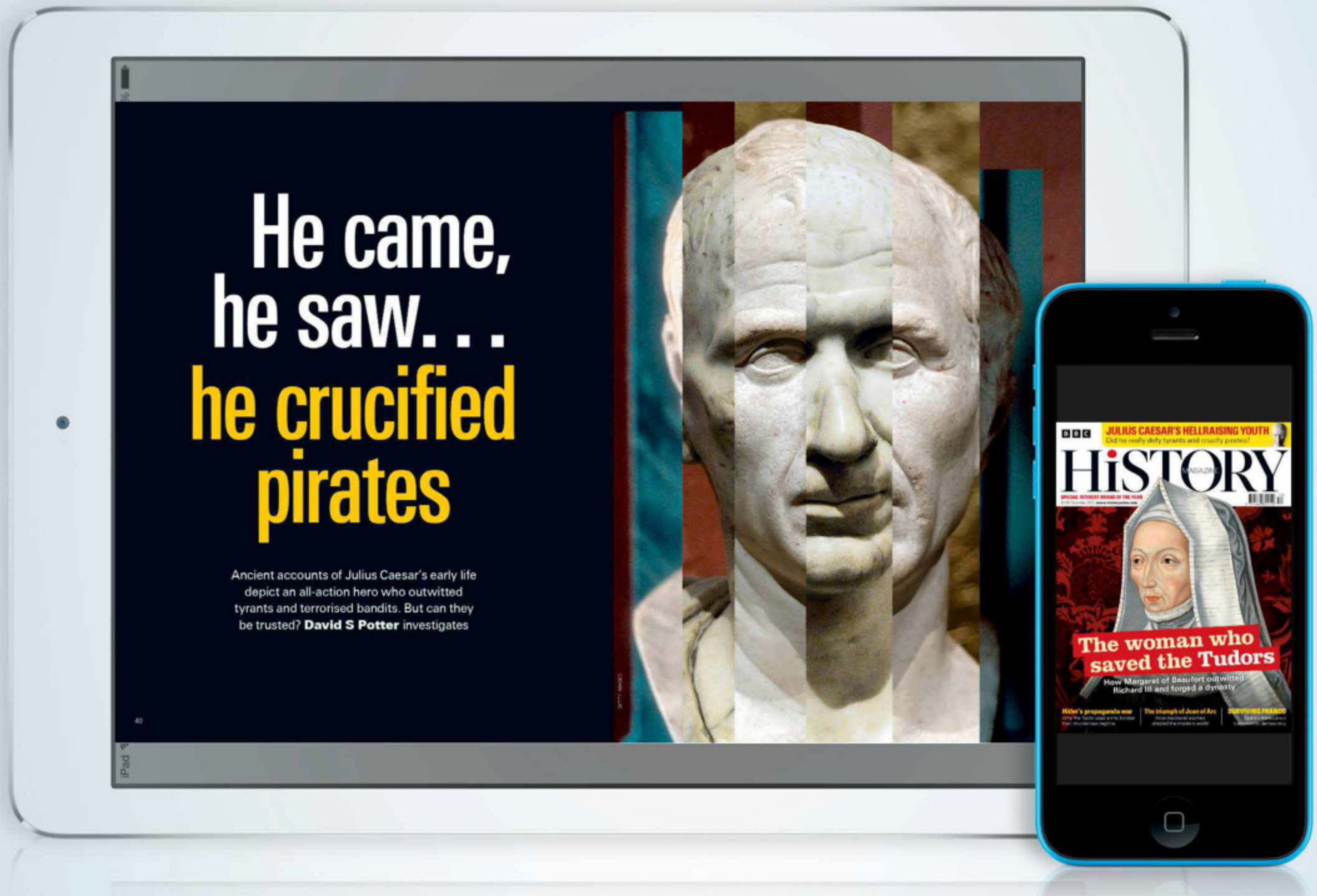

He came, he saw... he crucified pirates

Ancient accounts of Julius Caesar's early life depict an all-action hero who outwitted tyrants and terrorised bandits. But can they be trusted? **David S Potter** investigates

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Q&A

A selection of historical **conundrums** answered by experts

Could someone have really been hanged for stealing a sheep in the 19th century?

“One might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb,” goes the old proverb. The meaning is simple: if you are going to be punished for a small crime, you may as well commit the bigger one.

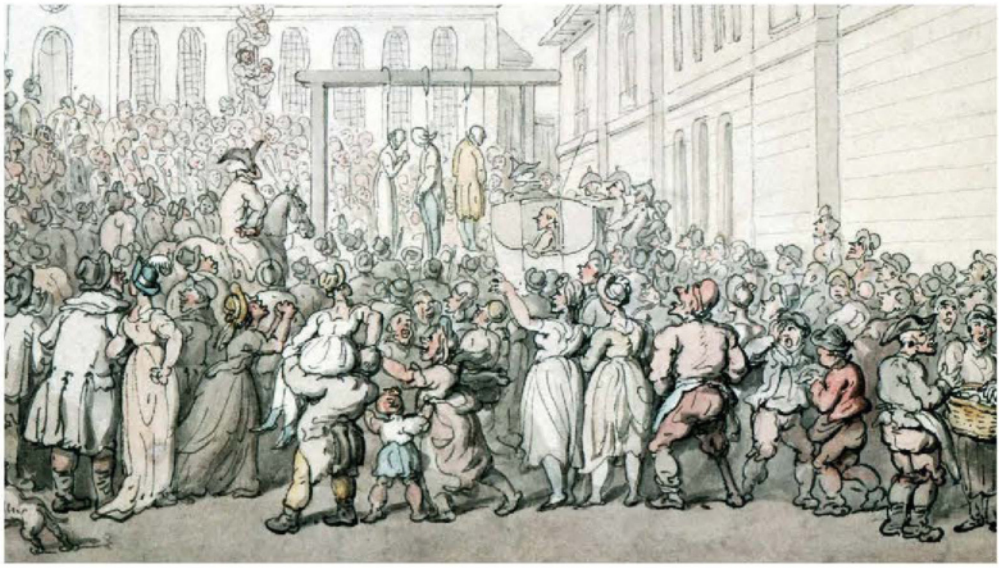
In the early 19th century, hanging was prescribed for a wide range of offences, including sheep stealing. The hangmen of England were kept busy dispatching murderers, highway robbers, burglars, forgers and horse thieves. Even shoplifters, pickpockets and those who stole goods valued at more than 1 shilling (about £4–5 today) could be sentenced to death. There were more than 200 separate acts for which hanging was mandated, so we might expect the ‘bloody code’ of the Georgians to be, well, very bloody.

The reality was quite different. Historians have established that executions were relatively common in south-east England, particularly London. However, in more far-flung parts of the kingdom – Wales, Cornwall, north-east England – years might go by without anyone being killed in this way.

From 1718, judges were able to commute death sentences by transporting prisoners to the Americas to work as indentured labourers. That option closed with the American War of Independence, but from 1787 a new destination was found for those reprieved from the noose: New South Wales. The long years of war with France also allowed offenders who might have met the hangmen to fight for their country instead, but that loophole closed after 1815.

In the 1820s Robert Peel, the new Tory home secretary, began rationalising the criminal justice system. Most famous for creating the Metropolitan Police in 1829, Peel also presided over a reduction in the number of capital offences. During the 1820s and 1830s, the death penalty was rescinded for almost every crime except murder – so, by the time Victoria took the throne, no one would be hanged for stealing a sheep, a lamb, a purse or a pocket watch. Instead, England embarked on a prison-building programme and, by the 1860s, imprisonment replaced transportation as the default punishment for lawbreakers.

Drew Gray, social historian of the 18th and 19th centuries specialising in crime and punishment



An execution at Newgate Prison, London, in an illustration by Thomas Rowlandson from the turn of the 19th century

Wrestlers Sting and Hulk Hogan face off in 1999. That entertainment is built on ‘kayfabe’

What are the historical origins of ‘kayfabe’ in wrestling?

In the world of professional wrestling, kayfabe describes the situation in which the matches, storylines, characters and feuds between good guys (babyfaces) and bad (heels) are perceived to be real. The term, which possibly originated in American travelling carnivals as slang for ‘be fake’, has long been held sacrosanct; indeed, wrestling depends on the audience buying into kayfabe.

Though predominately used in wrestling, the principles of kayfabe – the construction of a reality, the playing of parts, and convincing everyone to go along with it – can be glimpsed in history. Think of 16th and 17th-century witch-hunts or the Red Scare of the 1950s: a kayfabe of sorts was built on fear of a certain group of people, be they witches or communists, with rhetoric, like a wrestling promo, rousing the populace. They also had larger-than-life characters in ‘Witchfinder General’ Matthew Hopkins and US senator Joe McCarthy, respectively.

That definition could, of course, be extrapolated: any time a narrative is created and disseminated, it is a form of kayfabe. That could include Indigenous people being deemed ‘savages’ in need of European civilisation, mighty leaders such as Alexander the Great comparing themselves to gods and the cults of personality surrounding 20th-century dictators.

Jonny Wilkes, freelance writer

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Why are important people known as 'bigwigs'?

The origin of the term bigwig lies, quite literally, in big wigs. The popularity of the wig among 18th-century men had little to do with deterring head lice or covering baldness. Rather, it was a symbol of power. Wigs were popularised by 17th-century monarchs such as Louis XIV of France and England's Charles II. By the 18th century, men's wigs were evolving with the fashions as swiftly as clothing did.

But not all wigs were created equal. They were potent signals of wealth, status and authority. Specific styles of wig quickly became visual shorthand for different professions. In medicine, a profession particularly famed for weighty, full-bottomed wigs, it was the physicians who wore the largest wigs, followed by the surgeons and the apothecaries. Hence wigs represented a sartorial code for deciphering social and professional hierarchies.

Wigs fell out of fashion amid the revolutionary fervour of the 1790s, when unpowdered and cropped hair became the new style of choice. Far from being symbols of modernity, wigs became outmoded relics.

But the wig retained symbolic authority. That legacy survives to this day, both in parliament and in the legal world – as well as in that notable linguistic relic of a time when a person's importance was measured by the size of their hair.

Serena Dyer, associate professor of fashion history, De Montfort University

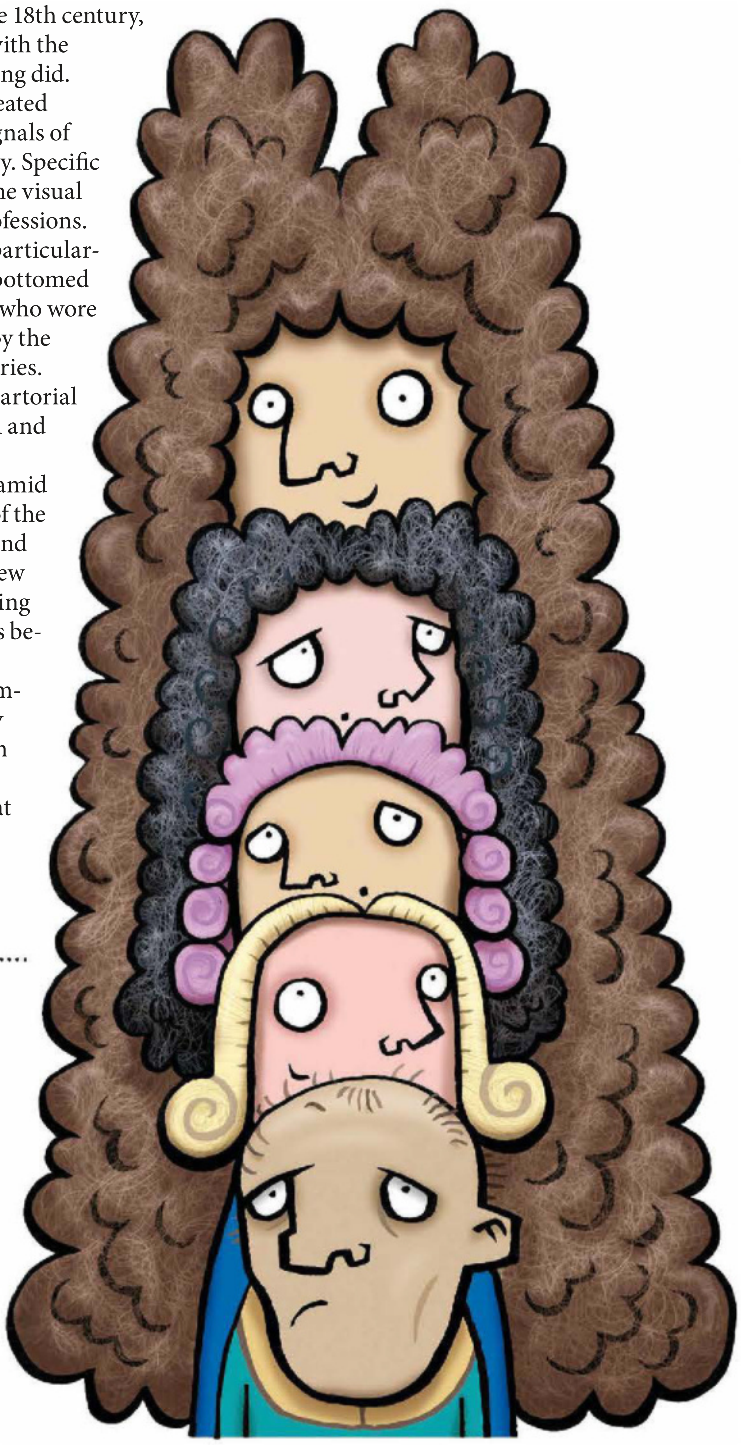

ILLUSTRATION BY **GLEN McBETH**

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DID YOU KNOW…?

Stink tank

Writers George Bernard Shaw and HG Wells were both members of an organisation called the Smell Society. Founded by the lawyer Ambrose Appelbe in 1935, the society campaigned for the improvement of often foul-smelling air. Members also aimed to concoct new terms to describe a variety of odours: Appelbe declared that he wanted to add 500 'smell' words to the English language. The Smell Society never had a large membership, and folded during the Second World War.

Fishy business

In 1872 Karl Staiger, a German naturalist working in Australia, sat down to a meal. Not recognising the fish he was served, he forwarded a sketch of it to a fellow scientist, the Comte de Castelnau, who declared it a new species that he named *Ompax spatuloides*. Unfortunately, Staiger was the victim of a prank. The new fish consisted of a mullet's body, an eel's tail and the bill of a platypus. *Ompax spatuloides* nonetheless remained on lists of Australian fish for decades.

The dogs of war

In 1925, a dispute arose between Greece and Bulgaria that was sparked, according to some accounts, when a Greek soldier crossed the border in pursuit of his stray dog – and was shot dead by Bulgarian sentries. The confrontation rapidly escalated, and the Greek government sent troops over the border in an attempt to occupy the town of Petrich. The so-called 'War of the Stray Dog' came to an end only after the intervention of the League of Nations, which enforced a ceasefire.

Nick Rennison, writer and journalist specialising in history

An errant dog dashing over the border from Greece into Bulgaria provoked an international incident

What rituals were involved in arranging a wedding in ancient Mesopotamia?

Among the upper classes of Mesopotamia c2000–490 BC, marriage was arranged by the parents. After obtaining their consent, the bridegroom would send a bride-price consisting of clothing, jewellery, food, drink and oil, which the 'best man' would carry in on a table or tray. Both parties would drink beer to symbolise the acceptance of the gift, and this as good as guaranteed the marriage legally, even if – as might be the case if the bride was very young – the ceremony itself took place years later.

On the wedding day, the bride would bathe and be anointed with oil, then dressed in a special garment, and a headband was placed on her head. In some periods she also wore a veil, symbolic of women of respectable status; the groom would uncover her head. Expensive feasts are amply documented by receipts for plentiful amounts of grain, oil, beer and sheep. Finally, the marriage would be consummated when the husband 'unfastened the pin of her virginity'. The best man would be standing by to witness the act, with a sword in hand to ward off any evil spirits (or anyone else!) who might try to interfere. Mythological poems tell that the new husband and wife would spend seven or eight nights of pleasure together, their lovemaking described as "choosing each other".

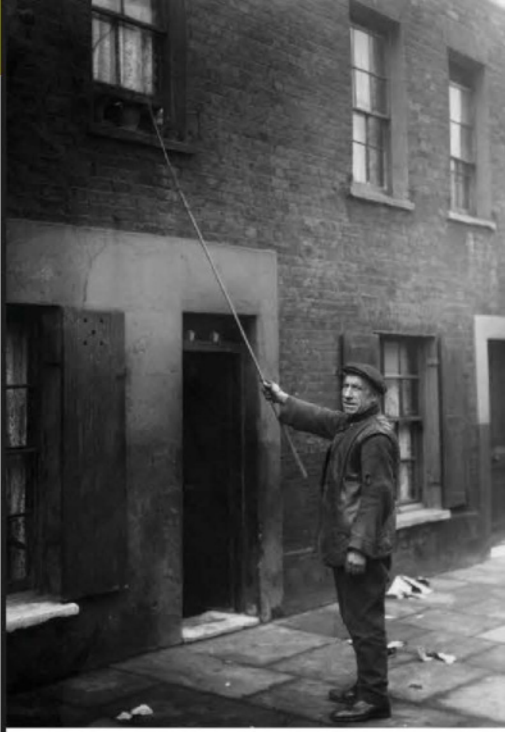
If couples divorced, a woman would keep her dowry; if there were children, the husband had to provide for them financially. Harsh penalties were prescribed for adultery, which was seen as a crime against the husband. The laws in the Code of Hammurabi, developed in the 18th century BC, state that a woman did not need to give a reason for leaving her husband; in practice, though, the marriage contracts of ordinary people stipulated that if the wife was found with another man, she would "die by the iron dagger". Equally, the financial cost of divorce was ruinously high for a husband, ensuring a strong commitment to the marriage from both parties.

Apparently, these clauses were not necessary for people from wealthier families, whose greater financial security enabled them to deal with property rights without such extreme measures. For the upper classes, though, marriage was a necessity – a way to guarantee property and protect the family name.

The beauty of the evidence from Mesopotamia is that we can witness these important events in the lives of people right across the social spectrum. And we can also see how they fared: for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, from former slaves to high society and even the gods, who got married like humans did – just without the contracts!

Selena Wisnom, lecturer in the heritage of the Middle East, University of Leicester

An ancient Mesopotamian sculpture thought to depict the mythical figure Utnapishtim and his wife



A knocker-upper in Hoxton, London in 1929. Such human alarm clocks roused those who had to start work in the early morning

Who were knocker-uppers?

The industrial revolution brought seismic changes in where and how people worked in Britain and Ireland – not to mention when. They had to be at the factory, mill, mine or dock at the start of their shift, or face punishment – without the help of cheap and reliable alarm clocks to wake them. The need to get out of bed on time gave rise to a new kind of job: the knocker-upper.

This was a man or woman hired for a few pence a week to come to a person's house at a set time and wake them up. As the name suggests, that initially entailed literally knocking on the front door, but this approach presented an obvious problem: the noise would likely disturb other people on the street who had not paid or did not want to be woken. Knocker-uppers therefore began using long bamboo poles to tap on upper windows; with the addition of metal hooks to such poles, they could scrape the glass instead. Other knocker-uppers used pea shooters.

Despite the unsociable hours they worked, these figures became fixtures of neighbourhoods, and were still seen in parts of northern England into the 1970s. But one question remains: how did *they* get up on time? Well, unless they adapted to a nocturnal lifestyle, they could always hire their own knocker-uppers – and so on, ad infinitum! ***JW***

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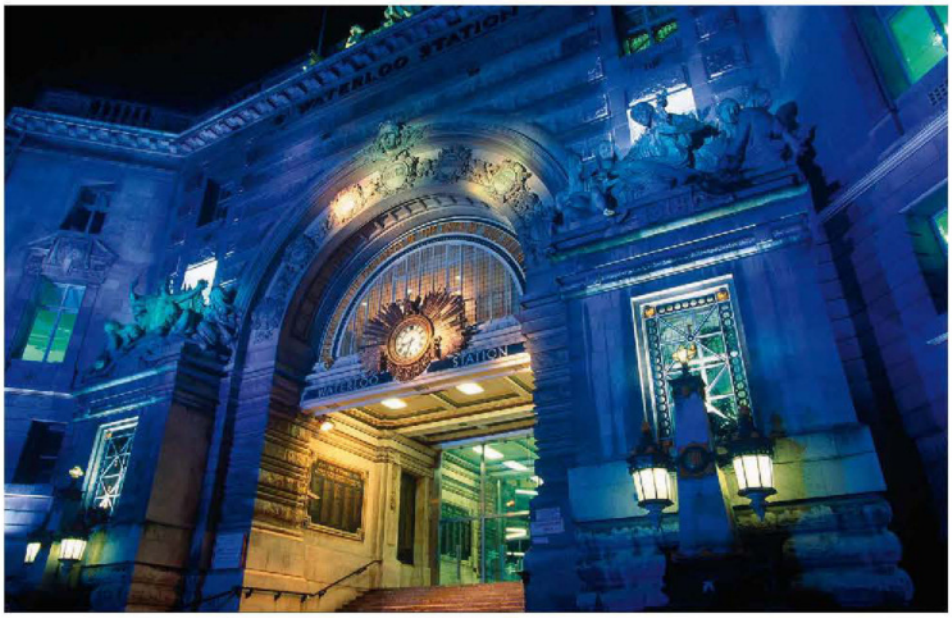
Why are some train stations named after famous battles?



Waterloo Station was opened on the south bank of the Thames in London in 1848, more than three decades after the bridge for which it was named, itself commemorating the 1815 battle

On the rail and Underground maps of London and that of the Paris Metro you'll see the names of various battles. The French capital has stations commemorating Stalingrad, the bloodiest engagement of the Second World War, and the ancient battles of Tolbiac and Alesia. The former of those last two, traditionally dated to AD 496, saw the Franks defeat the Alamanni, while the latter resulted in Julius Caesar's victory over the Gauls led by Vercingetorix in 52 BC. London has Waterloo, a nod to Napoleon's downfall in 1815.

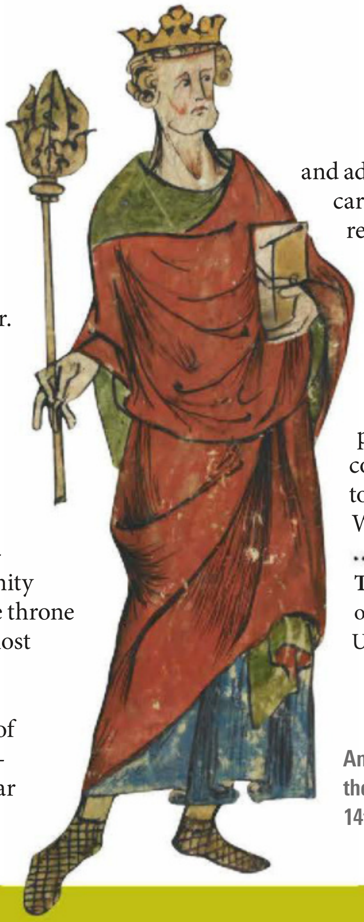
In the case of stations, naming tends to be based on location – so if one is built near a street, square or district that honours a battle, it's likely to also take that name. Hence Stalingrad station is at Place de la Bataille-de-Stalingrad; Tolbiac and Alesia are both roads; and Waterloo took its name from nearby Waterloo Bridge, which opened two years after the Duke of Wellington's famous victory.

In fact, the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century are well represented in London and Paris. The 1806 battle of Maida in Calabria, Italy – at which the French were defeated by a British expeditionary force under the leadership of Major-General John Stuart – inspired the name of a pub in west London, the Hero of Maida. That area – and, later, its Tube stop – became known as Maida Vale.

Back in Paris, the Gare d'Austerlitz was named after a neighbouring bridge that marked Napoleon's great victory against Russia and Austria at the battle of Austerlitz in 1805. Similarly, Iéna metro station on Avenue d'Iéna referred to his crushing defeat of Prussia at the battle of Jena in 1806.

Significantly, the era of the Napoleonic Wars coincided with the expansion of city infrastructure in both capitals during the early to mid-19th century. Many roads and bridges were being built, and the large-scale roll-out of railway travel involved the construction of numerous stations. Lots of new names were required around the time that the deeds of Napoleon, Wellington and so on were being commemorated – hence the preponderance of names linked to that tumultuous period. ***JW***

Was Edward the Confessor responsible for the Norman conquest?



An illustration of Edward the Confessor from an early 14th-century English chronicle

Edward, last of the ancient line of the kings of Wessex, ruled England 1042–66. Later regarded as a saint (hence 'Confessor'), he is also sometimes blamed for the Norman conquest. When he died in January 1066, the throne went to Harold Godwinson, brother of Edward's queen, Edith. Harold, the Earl of Wessex, claimed that Edward had nominated him as heir to the throne upon his deathbed.

Nine months later, on 14 October 1066, Duke William of Normandy defeated an Anglo-Saxon army in battle on the coast of what's now East Sussex, near Hastings. Harold was killed and William took the throne, claiming that Edward had promised it to him. Scholars who believe both camps accuse Edward of sparking the Conquest by promising the throne to two competing candidates.

In fact, there's good reason to doubt the claims of both men. William's story was made up after the Conquest to justify his invasion; there's no evidence in sources from before 1066 of Edward promising him the throne. William invented a similar story to justify his earlier conquest of the French county of Maine, claiming that the dead count had made him his heir. Seeing Harold as a usurper, William decided opportunistically to make a bid for the throne himself.

As for Harold, his relationship with Edward had soured by 1066. He was no longer obeying the king's orders and, when the opportunity came, he was able to take the throne largely because he was the most powerful man in the land.

Edward's real aim for the throne didn't involve either of those contenders. He intended that it should pass to Edgar Ætheling, his great-nephew and adopted son. Edith would take care of the realm until Edgar reached adulthood, and Harold would defend it. It was a good plan, similar to those in place in France and Germany – but not everybody wanted a regime led by Edith. Harold was the only person who could hold the country together. So if anyone's to blame for the Conquest, it's William, the invader.

Tom Licence, professor of medieval history at the University of East Anglia

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He came, he saw… he crucified pirates

Ancient accounts of Julius Caesar's early life depict an all-action hero who outwitted tyrants and terrorised bandits. But can they be trusted? **David S Potter** investigates

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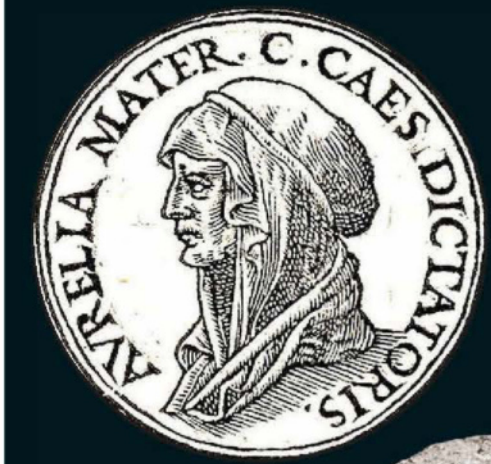
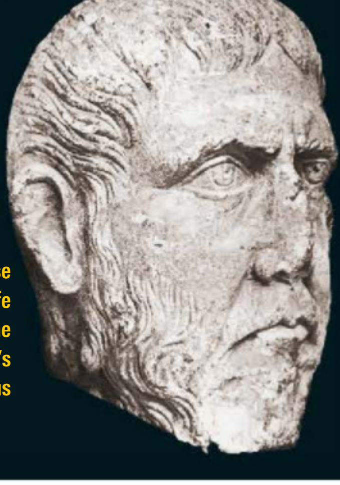

AVRELIA MATER. C. CAES. DICTATORIS.

Caesar was reportedly devoted to his mother, Aurelia, shown in a 16th-century woodcut

A bust of Julius Caesar as a young boy. He learned his mastery of language from a tutor during his teens, and his wit from an uncle famed for humour



A bust of Plutarch, whose accounts of Caesar's early life are based mostly on the writings of the dictator's trusted lieutenant Gaius Oppius

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The most celebrated of all ancient Romans almost met a watery end before he'd made his big splash in the vast ocean of history. In 75 BC, Julius Caesar – then in his mid-20s and yet to establish himself as the most powerful man in Rome – sailed to Rhodes to study with a famous Greek rhetorician. But on his journey east, he was kidnapped by Cilician pirates from southern Anatolia.

There was nothing so unusual about this stroke of misfortune – the waters of the eastern Mediterranean were plagued by bandits all too willing to prey on Roman travellers. But there was certainly something unusual about what happened next.

Seemingly oblivious to the danger in which he now found himself, Caesar decisively took control of the situation. According to his biographer, Plutarch, "when the pirates demanded 20 talents for his ransom, he laughed at them for not knowing who their captive was, and of his own accord agreed to give them 50". While his agents set out to raise the ransom money, Caesar made the pirates listen to his speeches and poetry, assuring them that he would come after them as soon as he was freed.

He was as good as his word. Having paid the ransom, Caesar raised a fleet from the cities of the Roman province of Asia (western Anatolia) and captured the pirates. Then, when he discovered that the corrupt governor of Asia was looking to make a profit from the captives, he "took the robbers out of prison and crucified them all, just as he had often warned them on the island that he would do, when they thought he was joking". It was a brutal act of revenge – softened only slightly by the fact that he slit the pirates' throats to spare them the agony that would have been their fate on the crosses.

Origin stories

Caesar's pirate-slaying escapades represent a truly extraordinary tale. But what are we to make of it? We know a great deal about Julius Caesar in the 'colossus' phase of his career – that period stretching from his mid-thirties to his assassination in his mid-fifties when he was an established political and military powerhouse. But for the earlier part of his life – before his every act was performed in the full glare of the ancient world's attention – it's a different story.

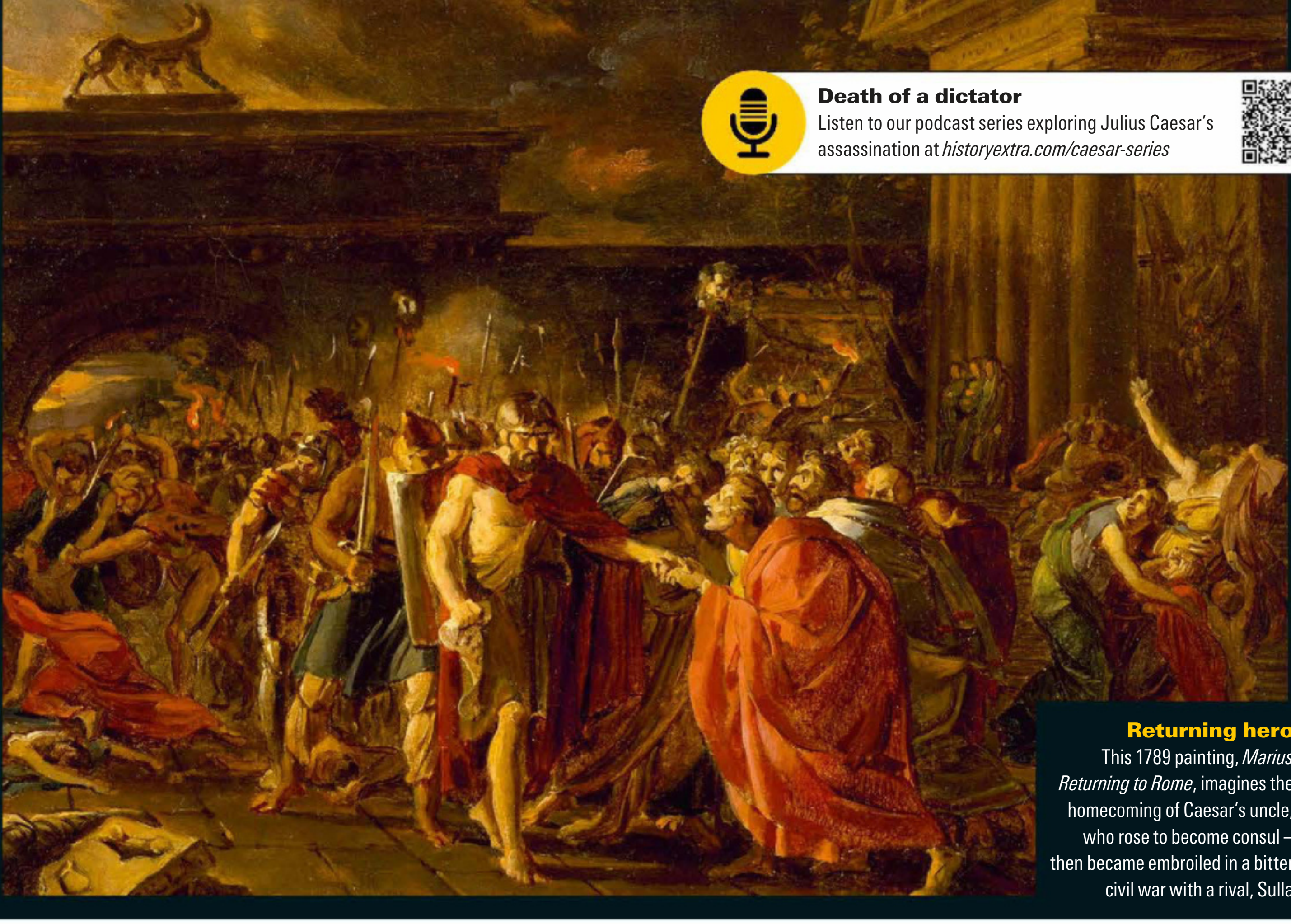
Caesar's youth and young manhood is shrouded in mystery and conjecture. The tales of his formative years are subject to exaggeration, even outright invention. Yet that doesn't make examining that early life any less worthwhile. Doing so gives us rich insights into not only the rise of one of the ancient world's towering figures but also of the political motivations of those who wrote that history in the chaos that followed his death.

Caesar's youth is shrouded in mystery, with tales subject to exaggeration, even outright invention

Much of what we know about Caesar's early life has come to us through his two biographers, Suetonius and the aforementioned Plutarch, both writing towards the beginning of the second century AD, around 150 years after his death. Their accounts of those early years are quite similar, which suggests that they drew on a common source. Based on quotations in Suetonius's writings, that source can be identified as Gaius Oppius, one of Caesar's most powerful lieutenants.

When it came to setting the record straight, Oppius was more interested in a good story than the truth. The same was true of his colleague Aulus Hirtius, who was at work in the same months editing and updating notes that Caesar himself had left behind. Both men were working under the overall guidance of Cornelius Balbus, who had been Caesar's chief of staff.

Oppius got to work soon after Caesar's murder on the Ides of March 44 BC. He needed to set the record straight at a time when Caesar's legacy was being challenged by two very different forces. First, and most predictably, there were the assassins, who presented the slain leader as a tyrant whose character was shaped by uncontrolled arrogance and ambition. The second was



Death of a dictator
Listen to our podcast series exploring Julius Caesar's assassination at *historyextra.com/caesar-series*

Returning hero
This 1789 painting, *Marius Returning to Rome*, imagines the homecoming of Caesar's uncle, who rose to become consul – then became embroiled in a bitter civil war with a rival, Sulla

aspiring ruler Mark Antony – leading general and one of Caesar's most powerful supporters – who was also shaping the dead dictator's legacy to suppress the interests of his chosen heir, Octavian, the future emperor Augustus.

So what do Oppius's writings, communicated to us via Suetonius and Plutarch, tell us about Caesar's earlier years? And do they contain any clues about how this product of a moderately successful patrician family rose to such dizzying heights of power?

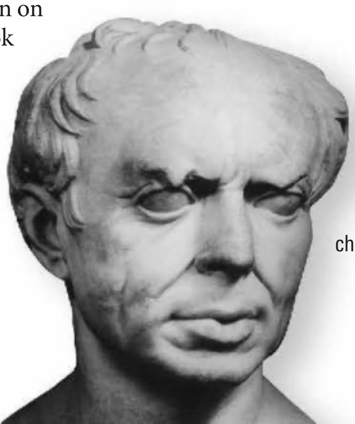
Classical education

Caesar certainly seems to have benefited from a good eduction. His mother, Aurelia – whom Plutarch describes as "a woman of discretion" – saw to that. She found him an excellent tutor for his early teens, Marcus Antonius Gnipho, who went on to run his own well-regarded school. Gnipho had strong views on the Latin language, arguing that a word should only have a single meaning. This made quite an impression on his pupil: Caesar later wrote a book about this very subject, endorsing his tutor's opinions. Another influence was an uncle, Caesar Strabo Vopiscus, who was famous for his wry sense of humour, which perhaps inspired the wit in Caesar's writings.

One person missing from any story of Caesar's youth is his father, Gaius Julius Caesar. The biographies emphasise Caesar junior's devotion to his mother, Aurelia, and make a great deal of his link to another uncle, Gaius Marius, who was renowned as the saviour of Rome from a barbarian invasion around the time of Caesar's birth. His father, however, is nowhere to be seen.

Was Caesar senior an absent dad? Or did he just not care? The marriages arranged for his offspring – to people who, while socially acceptable, lacked the drive to support the young Caesar – suggests the latter. The young Caesar's first marriage, in his early teens, was to a girl named Cossutia, whose family hailed from well outside the political elite.

Young Caesar's status changed after his uncle Marius had himself installed as consul of Rome – the highest elected public official in the Republic – alongside Cornelius Cinna, following a civil war in 87 BC. To bolster this alliance, Marius had Caesar's marriage to Cossutia dissolved so that the teenager could marry Cinna's daughter, Cornelia. Caesar, we're told, loved Cornelia deeply. If his father had any influence on the new match, the sources don't mention it.



A bust of Gaius Marius, who played a formative role in Caesar's early life, choosing his second wife

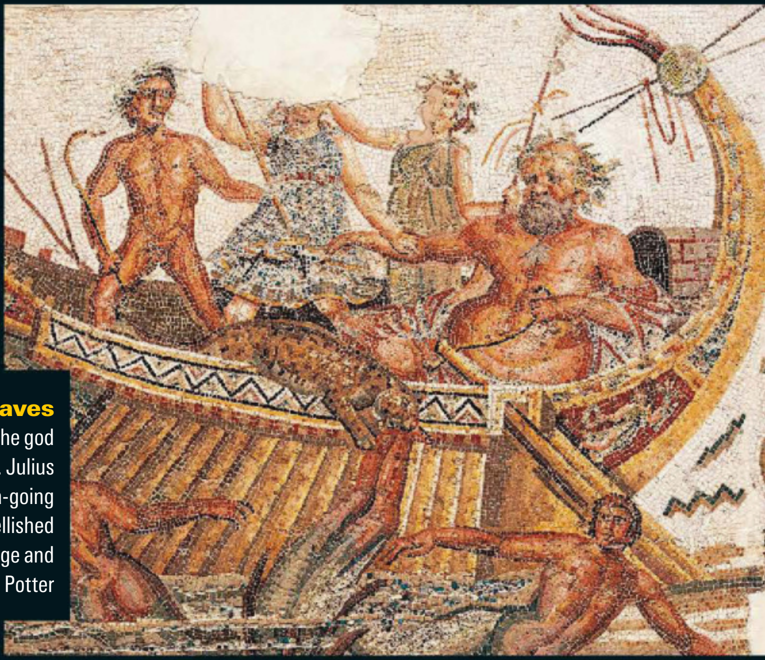
AKG/ALAMY

Thanks to his family connections, the young Caesar was increasingly pulled into the orbit of political power. For his later biographers, though, that wasn't enough: what was needed at this stage in his life were adventures providing context for the great events that came later. If these episodes included triumph over loss and oppression, all the better. And in Caesar's interactions with the Roman general and dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix, that's exactly what they got. Sulla's dramatic arrival on the scene – seizing Rome, establishing a dictatorship and ruthlessly hunting down his enemies – shaped the politics of a generation. It also shaped the politics of Caesar himself.

Sulla had become a major figure on the political stage when he was elected to one of Rome's two consulships, in 88 BC. He was then awarded a campaign against Mithridates, ruler of the kingdom of Pontus, who had invaded Rome's provinces in western Anatolia and encouraged the slaughter of Roman citizens. But then the command against Mithridates was taken from Sulla and awarded to Caesar's uncle Marius. That's when things turned ugly.

Outraged, Sulla marched on Rome, stormed the city and declared that he had restored the rightful constitution. Marius was forced into hiding, but then returned with Cinna a year later, in 87 BC, winning the civil war mentioned earlier. Sulla then turned the tables on his enemies once again, launching a huge invasion of Italy in 83 BC. His military victory was complete by the end of the following year, at which point he posted up the names of his enemies – his notorious 'proscription lists' – around Rome.

Where did this leave Caesar? We can't know for sure. Yet, as the nephew of Marius and son-in-law of Cinna, he may well have been at the top of those lists. Sulla certainly seems to have made life pretty uncomfortable for him. The sources claim that the dictator deprived Caesar of the post of *flamen dialis* (high priest of Jupiter) to which he had been – or was about to be – appointed. They also tell us of Sulla's demand that Caesar divorce Cornelia – and that, when the young man refused, he was forced to flee.



Ruling the waves
A Roman mosaic depicts the god Bacchus fighting pirates. Julius Caesar's encounter with sea-going bandits may have been embellished to emphasise his courage and resilience, writes David S Potter

Marked man

For Caesar's biographers, there was no lack of drama in this period of their subject's life. He was, they tell us, pursued into hiding by one of Sulla's assassins, who soon caught up with the fugitive – and spared him only after he agreed to pay a large bribe. When Caesar did eventually appear before Sulla, accompanied by his mother's brothers and the Vestal Virgins, Sulla reluctantly granted him a pardon. "Have your way and take him," he reportedly declared, "only bear in mind that the man you are so eager to save will one day deal the death blow to the cause of the aristocracy, which you have joined with me in upholding; for in this Caesar there is more than one Marius."

At this point we must proceed with caution. Did Sulla really utter these portentous words? To many historians, they bear all the hallmarks of a dramatic device, injected into the story to add an extra layer of jeopardy. As for the claim that Sulla denied Caesar the priesthood, that appears to be even more unlikely – because the latter never would have held the position. Cornelius Tacitus, Rome's greatest historian, states that the post of *flamen dialis* remained unoccupied for 75 years after the death of a priest called Merula in 87 BC. What's more, a requirement for the post was that both of the priest's parents be patricians – members of Rome's archaic aristocracy. Aurelia was from a wealthy family, but she was no patrician.

Some historians have also speculated that Sulla's antipathy towards Caesar has been overstated. Light is shed on this point by Caesar's first post, an appointment to the Roman province of Asia, where he served under one of Sulla's most trusted lieutenants. Would this man really have taken on a youth whom his boss hated? It seems unlikely.

Caesar's service in Asia was notable for two events. One was the award he won for valour, having saved the life of a fellow soldier in combat. The other was his dispatch to the kingdom of Bithynia in the north-west corner of Anatolia, where he convinced the ruler, Nicomedes IV, to lend Rome naval reinforcements. A story that has swirled for 2,000 years – that Caesar had a sexual relationship with Nicomedes (Suetonius writes that "he dawdled so long at the court of Nicomedes that he was suspected of improper relations with the king") – appears to be baseless.

What does seem certain is that Caesar's experience of persecution by Sulla – deprived of office and property, pursued by homicidal thugs – moulded his later career. After his rise to power in the 60s BC, Caesar repeatedly drew contrasts between the mercy he showed his defeated foes and Sulla's mass murder of

A contemporary bust of Sulla. Having sent Caesar into flight, he dispatched an assassin to finish off the young man

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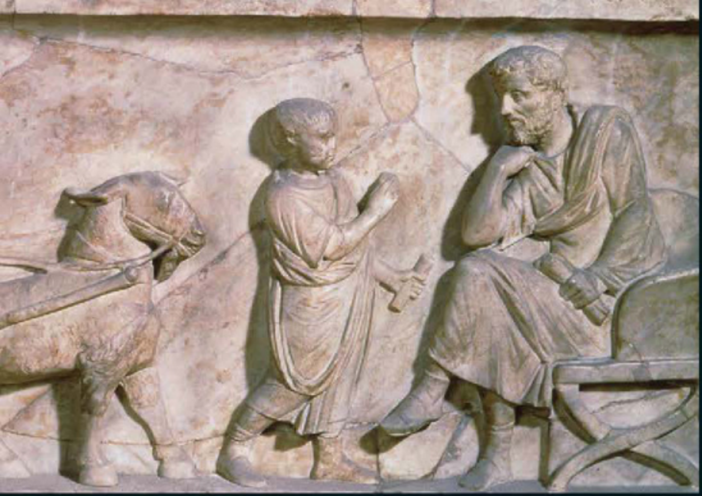
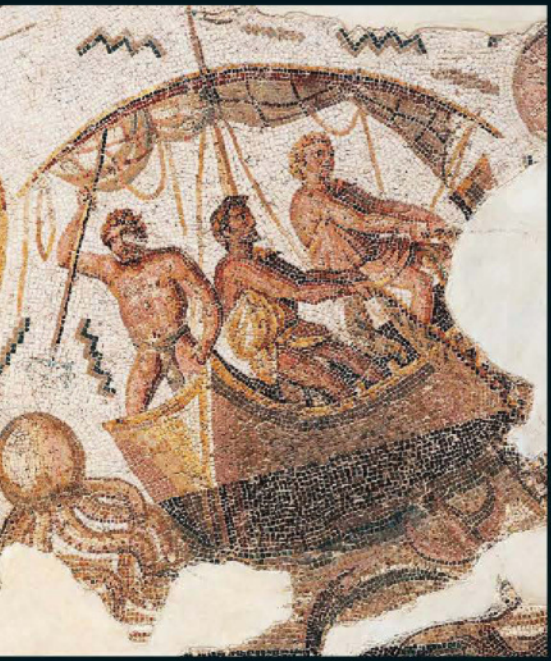


Major moments
Reliefs on a Roman sarcophagus depict events in a child's life. Caesar's youth was shaped by his mother, while his father seems to have been largely absent – or disinterested – during the boy's early years



Nicomedes IV of Bithynia, whom Caesar persuaded to lend Rome naval reinforcements during action in Asia

WIKIPEDIA (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

political rivals. And though he came from a noble family – descended, so the story goes, from Rome's founder, Aeneas – he took the 'popular' path to the political summit in a bid to undo Sulla's conservative constitution, which was designed to keep wealth in the hands of Sulla's friends and prevent ambitious people from challenging the status quo.

Sulla died in 78 BC, and Caesar returned to Rome soon afterwards. A year later he embarked on a career in law, prosecuting two of Sulla's most prominent lieutenants for corruption in provincial offices. That wasn't an act of anti-regime revenge: young men routinely drew attention to themselves by serving as prosecutors. Caesar's speech in one of these cases, prosecuting a man named Antonius, was so effective that the officials in charge of maintaining the citizen roll quoted it when they banished the convicted man.

Caesar's eloquence was soon attracting more attention among the ranks of Rome's elite. In the words of Plutarch: "It is said that Caesar had the greatest natural talent for political oratory, and cultivated his talent most ambitiously." Even Cicero, who opposed Caesar, later stated that the latter could have become the greatest orator of his generation.

> His biographer needed to burnish Caesar's story, showcasing his subject's courage, resilience and resourcefulness

But that wasn't good enough for Oppius. He needed to burnish Caesar's story with one more escapade showcasing his subject's courage, resilience and resourcefulness. The tale of his capture by pirates did just that.

Unlikely anecdotes

So, to return to an earlier question, what are we to make of this tale? Caesar may well have been captured by pirates, but details in the story ring alarm bells. A ransom of 50 talents appears extremely high in a region that was largely bankrupt. And at the time, Caesar held no public office and, therefore, no authority to kill anyone, even a pirate.

Perhaps, then, we should reassess this episode by considering what Oppius was trying to say about his former boss. The story was, perhaps, an attempt to contrast the 'mercy' of Caesar with the brutality of Crassus, who crucified thousands of Spartacus's followers a few years later – and didn't cut their throats to spare them protracted suffering. It also establishes Caesar as a foe of piracy years before Pompey – his one-time ally, later bitter enemy – took on a command to purge pirates from the seas.

No matter how extravagantly the stories of Caesar's dealings with Sulla and his capture by pirates were embellished, it's not hard to join the dots between the young Caesar and the icon. He was a brilliant student of literature, shaped by excellent role models. His relationship with Aurelia, a strong character in her own right, may have influenced his own attraction to smart, powerful women, including his long-term mistress Servilia and later, Cleopatra. And he was courageous. The man who stood in the front line during crises in Gaul and the civil war against Pompey was the same person who had saved a fellow soldier's life in Asia.

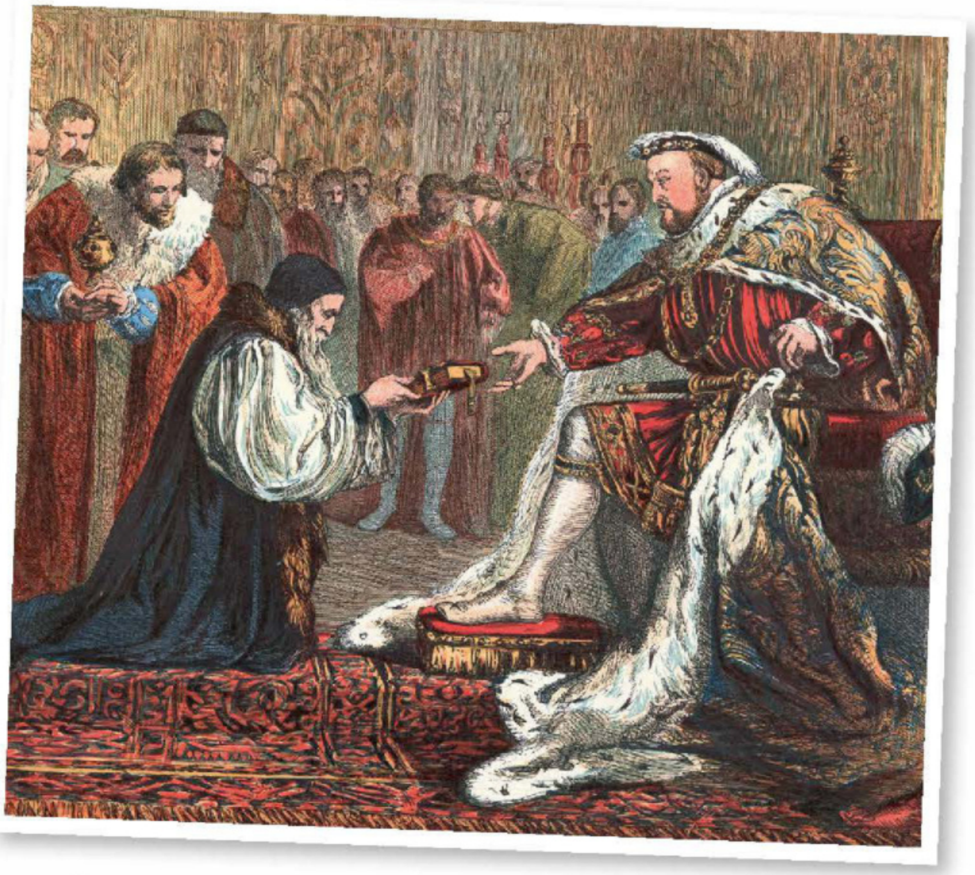
Caesar the politician, however, was more the product of the dysfunctional Rome of his adulthood than of any event in his youth. When all's said and done, it was his meticulous attention to detail and supreme ability to think on his feet that powered his incredible rise. And it seems that these were talents with which he was born, rather than ones honed through the adventures of youth.

David S Potter is a professor of Greek and Roman history at the University of Michigan. His latest book, *Master of Rome: A Life of Julius Caesar*, is published by OUP in November

Melvyn Bragg and guests discussed Caesar in an episode of BBC Radio 4's **In Our Time**: *bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b04jlygw*

FIVE THINGS YOU (PROBABLY) DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT…
the Tudors

Ruth Goodman, who teaches our new HistoryExtra Academy course on Tudor life, shares five insights about the dynasty's legacy

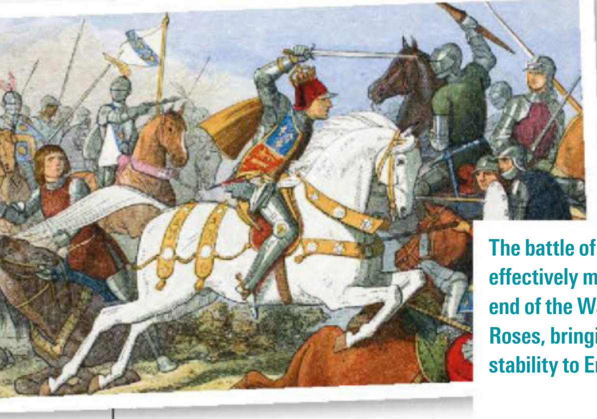


An engraving shows Hugh Latimer, Bishop of Worcester during the Reformation, presenting an English translation of the Bible to Henry VIII

1 The Tudors brought peace and prosperity to England

Bringing peace was probably the most important thing the Tudors did for us. The British countryside is littered with the sites of medieval battles – places where opposing forces stomped over crops, burned barns and rounded up people's sons. For centuries, rival aristocrats made and broke alliances, and killed those who got in their way. Henry Tudor took the throne in exactly this way at Bosworth in 1485, when he persuaded a number of warlords to desert their king, Richard III.

But there it stopped. Intrigue and power politics were thenceforth undertaken by more covert means. Everyone became a bit safer, the day-to-day became a bit more predictable, and lots of people got a little bit richer. Less war meant that more crops made it to market, more young men were available for work, and there was less damage done to buildings, less thievery with menaces and safer travel. In turn, this meant more trade and a greater willingness to invest. The peace the Tudors brought to their lands benefited all – rich and poor alike.



The battle of Bosworth effectively marked the end of the Wars of the Roses, bringing relative stability to England

2 Henry VIII was a reluctant reformer

When the Tudors came to power, the Catholic church was already struggling to maintain its grip upon the minds and souls of Europe. New ideas about the nature of God and the state of Christianity were circulating. So when Henry VIII lost patience with the pope, there were plenty of people delighted by the opportunity to rethink England's official religious position.

Henry himself seems to have been happy to leave the religion as was. He just wanted the power and money the pope had been leveraging from his kingdom. He was quickly convinced, though, that he should also have the money and assets of the monasteries. A significant number of influential and vocal people wanted much more, however, pushing for a 'purer' form of Christianity that did away with priests entirely and abandoned the rituals and traditions of Catholicism. Others, of course, wholeheartedly defended the time-honoured form of faith.

The result was a fracturing of society. Hundreds, both Protestant and Catholic, were executed for refusing to change their form of faith and follow the state-sponsored format – one that changed radically several times. But for all the death and fear, the upset and soul-searching, a new freedom of thought also emerged.

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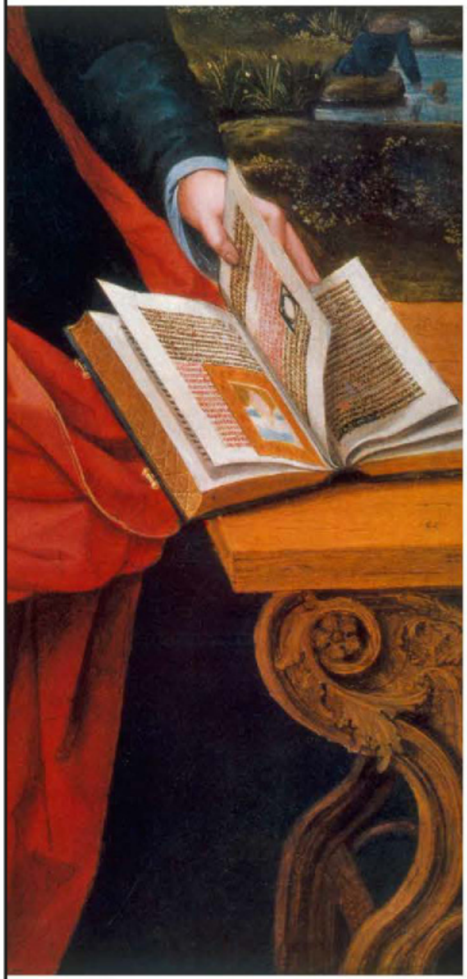
HISTORY EXTRA ACADEMY
Download the HistoryExtra app now and watch Ruth Goodman's new **online course** on Tudor life

3 The Tudor era brought a rise in literacy

A few years before Henry Tudor took the throne, in 1476, William Caxton printed his first book on English soil. As printing presses became established and the price of books plummeted, reading became affordable to many more people. There was also more choice. Alongside religious texts, books of popular stories, advice manuals, joke books, medical texts and scandal sheets were published.

At the same time, there was a new religious pressure for Britons to learn to read. The Protestant faith required its adherents to stop relying on priests and to read the Bible for themselves. This applied to everyone: shepherds and ploughmen as well as nobles and merchants – even women. Teaching people to read became a new religious duty and literacy rates started to climb.



During the Tudor era, literacy grew, in part because Protestantism emphasised reading the Bible rather than the word of God being mediated by a priest

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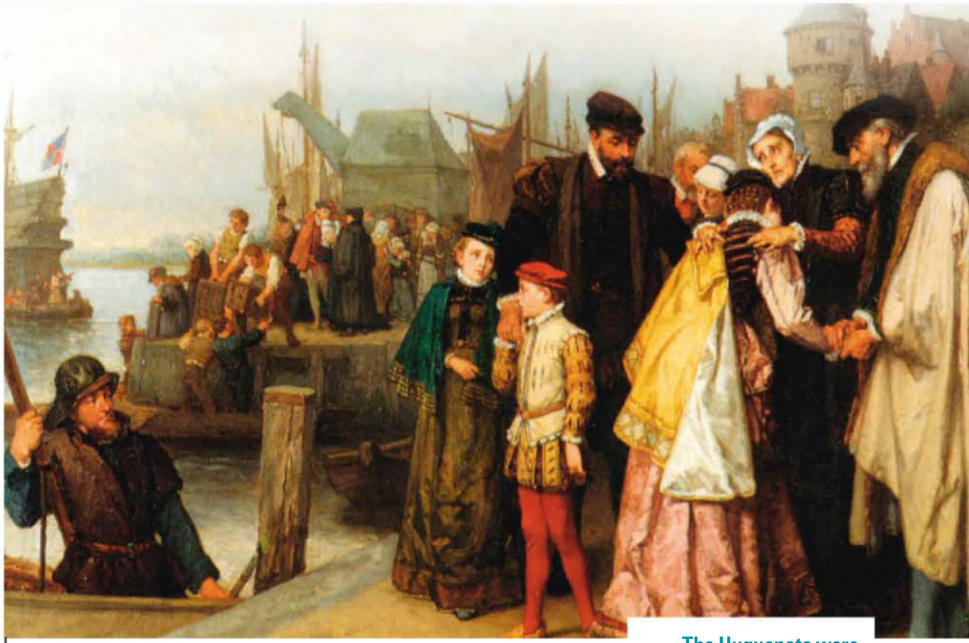


The Huguenots were Protestants who were forced to leave France. Many settled in England

4 They drove the expansion of industry

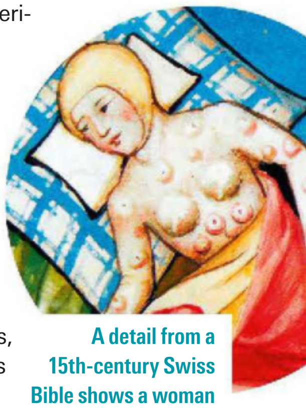
The Tudor monarchs – Elizabeth, in particular – were very keen to kickstart new industries and update old ones. In order to do this, specialist workers from Europe were encouraged to resettle on these shores. Some came as refugees fleeing religious persecution in France and the Low Countries, bringing new textile-making skills. Others were purely economic migrants with mining expertise or knowledge of new glassblowing and brass-founding techniques.

The strategy worked – and these new arrivals provided the core of know-how and experience around which English industry could grow.

5 The health of the nation improved

Rates of fatal illness fell during the Tudor period – though this was the result of sheer luck, as certain major diseases mutated into less virulent forms. When a new, often lethal form of the plague arrived in England in 1348 – the Black Death – it killed around a third of the population, suddenly and catastrophically. Plague returned to Britain many times over the centuries that followed but, by the start of the Tudor era, the outbreaks were becoming smaller and more people were surviving.

Meanwhile, another major killer known as the sweating sickness – a mysterious disease causing rapidly developing symptoms including shivers, headaches, dizziness, pains and, soon afterwards, sweating and commonly death – came and went. The first epidemic broke out in 1485, just as the Tudor era was beginning, and the last came in 1551, after which it apparently vanished completely. With both of these big killers in retreat, the population began to grow.



A detail from a 15th-century Swiss Bible shows a woman with the plague

Ruth Goodman is a social and domestic historian and broadcaster. Her books include *How to Be a Tudor* (Viking, 2015)

Army Benevolent Fund

“

I left a gift in my Will to the ABF...

Will you?

This Christmas, I’d like to share something that’s very close to my heart.

A message from Harry, Army Benevolent Fund supporter.

Like many of you, I’ve reflected on how to make a lasting difference after I’m gone and for me, that meant including the ABF in my Will. The ABF has been supporting soldiers, veterans, and their families since 1944 — and I wanted to help ensure that support continues for generations to come.

When I learned that gifts in Wills provide around a third of the ABF’s fundraising income, I realised how vital these contributions are. They allow the charity to act quickly, to help those who need it most. After taking care of my loved ones, I wanted to leave something meaningful that reflects my gratitude for the Army family and the sacrifices made by so many.

This Christmas, please consider including the Army Benevolent Fund in your Will and together, we can make a lasting difference in the lives of soldiers, veterans, and their families.

Thank you for reading — and for considering a gift that truly keeps on giving.
Harry

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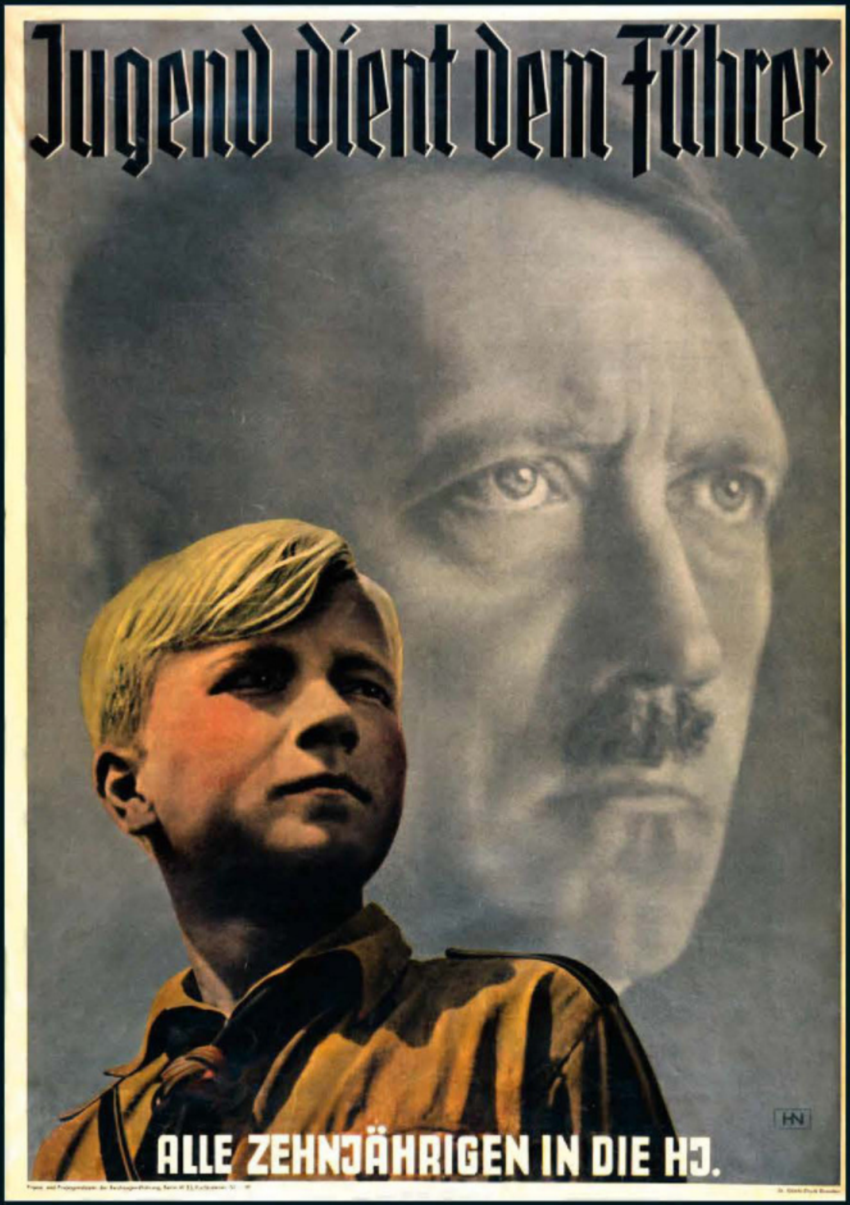
Partly gilded cartonnage mask, 380–30 BCE, cartonnage (linen and paste), gold and paint. Photograph © The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge


Jugend dient dem Führer
ALLE ZEHNJÄHRIGEN IN DIE HJ.
HN

Shaping young minds
This poster from c1939, designed by Hein Neuner, demands that "Jugend dient dem Führer" ("Youth serves the Führer") and calls for "All 10-year-olds in the HJ." Large-scale propaganda recruited both boys and girls to the Nazi Party's youth groups within the broader Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth or HJ)

The Nazis' war of words

Hitler and his acolyte Joseph Goebbels wielded propaganda as a potent weapon in the battle for German hearts and minds. **Lisa Pine** shows how posters targeted all sectors of society to promote prejudice and bolster support for party policies

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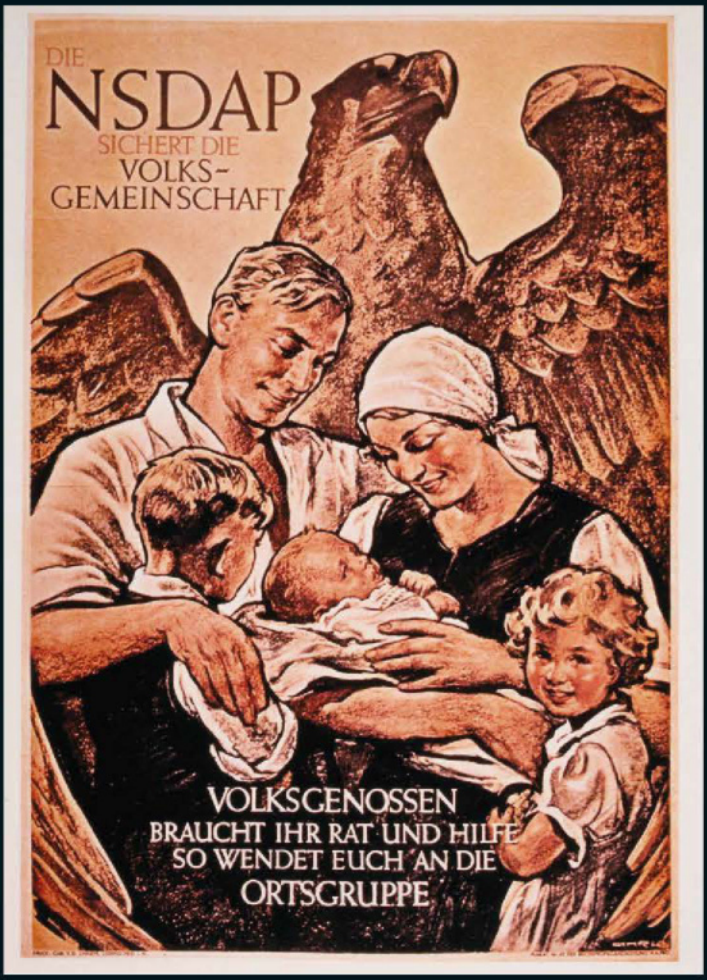


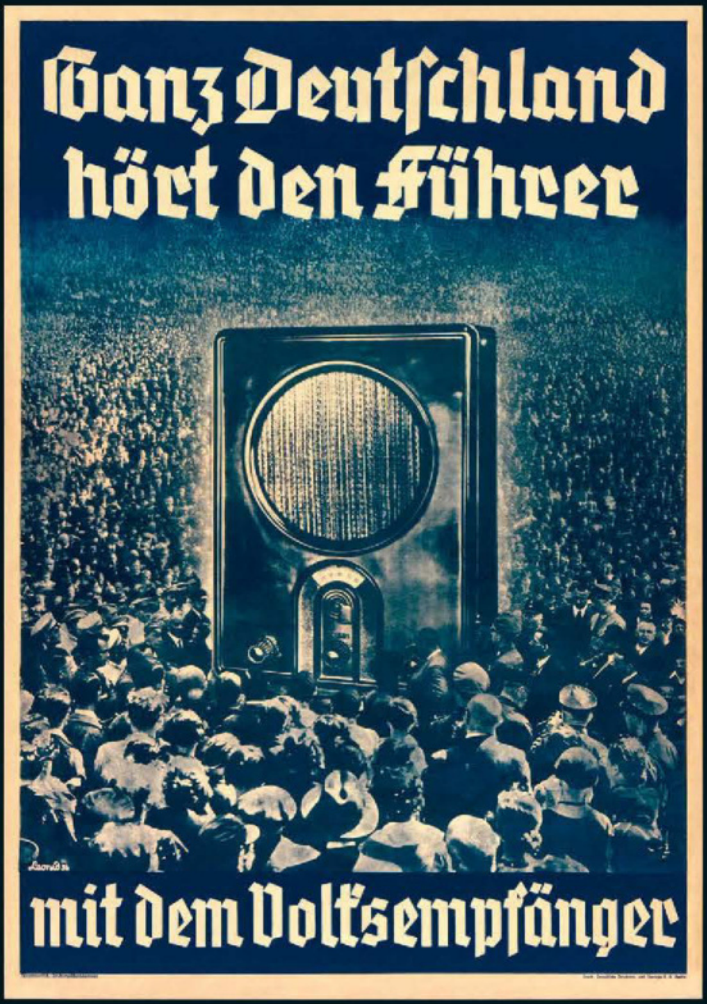
FAMILY PLANNING

The Nazis considered nuclear families to be the building blocks of a 'pure' German nation

The family was exalted in Nazi ideology and propaganda as "the germ cell of the nation". In the Nazi Party platform, a 25-point programme outlining their political goals, it was declared that: "The state must ensure that the nation's health standards are raised by protecting mothers and infants."

This 1936 poster shows the Nazi eagle spreading its wings protectively over the valuable German family. Echoing the eagle, the father of the family has his arms around his wife and one of his children; the mother holds a baby in her arms, while a third young child smiles out at the viewer. "The NSDAP protects the national community" is the headline slogan, with further wording proclaiming that "national comrades" could turn to their local NSDAP group for help or advice.

The Nazi Party did indeed provide assistance and counsel to families – provided that they were deemed 'pure' German, hereditarily healthy, and of good blood and character.



OWNING THE AIRWAVES

Encouraging universal uptake of radios, the Nazis hijacked broadcast media for propaganda purposes

Radio offered a convenient way of streaming propaganda and speeches directly into homes – so, unsurprisingly, the Nazis were keen to ensure that as many Germans as possible had their own radios. Hence the *Volksempfänger* ('People's Receiver'), a range of low-cost sets developed by the government from 1933.

"All Germany listens to the Führer with the People's Receiver," proclaims this 1936 poster, one of several designed to encourage take-up. The implication was, of course, that every proud citizen would be expected to buy a set and tune in to listen to Hitler. And the effort succeeded: by 1939, 70 per cent of German households owned a radio, creating a mass audience for the regime's output. In 1933 alone, Hitler made at least 50 radio broadcasts. Communal listening was also encouraged, to heighten the emotional impact of speeches, with loudspeakers set up in town squares and other public areas for this purpose.

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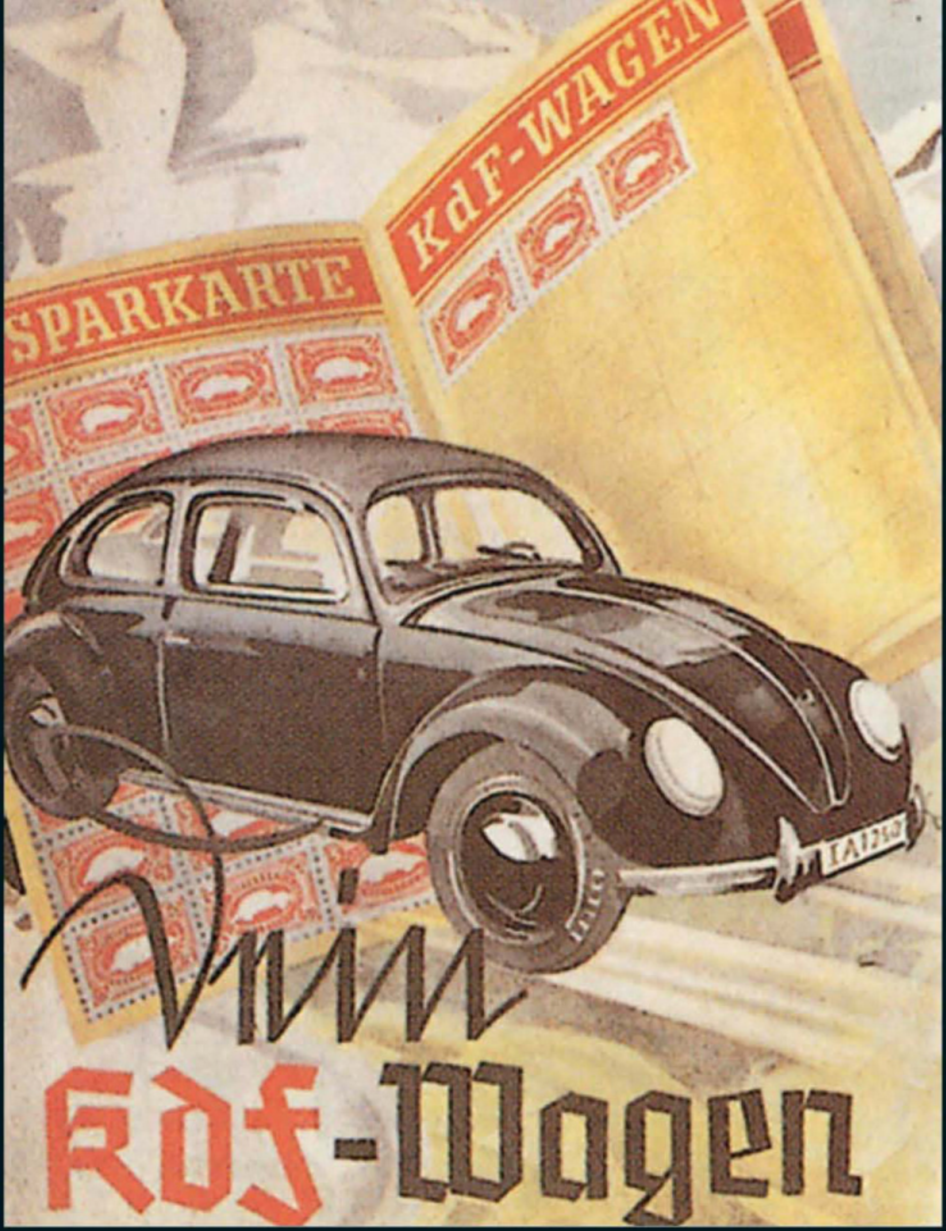
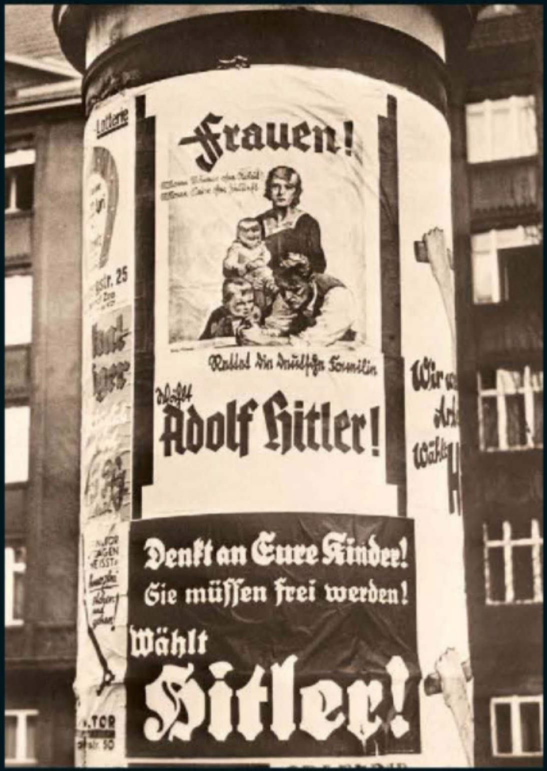
DRIVING FORCE

A scheme designed to boost car ownership reflected the regime's plan to motorise Germany

The Nazis were determined that Germany should be a nation of motorists as a signifier of the regime's modernity, speed and progress. From August 1938, workers were encouraged to save for a Volkswagen ('People's Car') via the government-backed Kraft durch Freude (KdF; Strength through Joy) organisation. To make car ownership accessible to all Germans, not just the wealthy elites who were previously able to afford one, the KdF-Wagen scheme involved paying instalments of 5 Reichsmarks each week for four and a half years. Posters such as this 1938 example, showing a black Volkswagen with a voucher card, were produced to promote the scheme. By 1939, some 270,000 people had signed up.

The Volkswagen was intended as "a car for free time and leisure" – no longer largely the preserve of the business sector but a desirable, useful and enjoyable consumer product. However, the outbreak of war in 1939 choked the output of KdF cars, as the economy was diverted to support armament production and factories were dedicated to turning out military vehicles.





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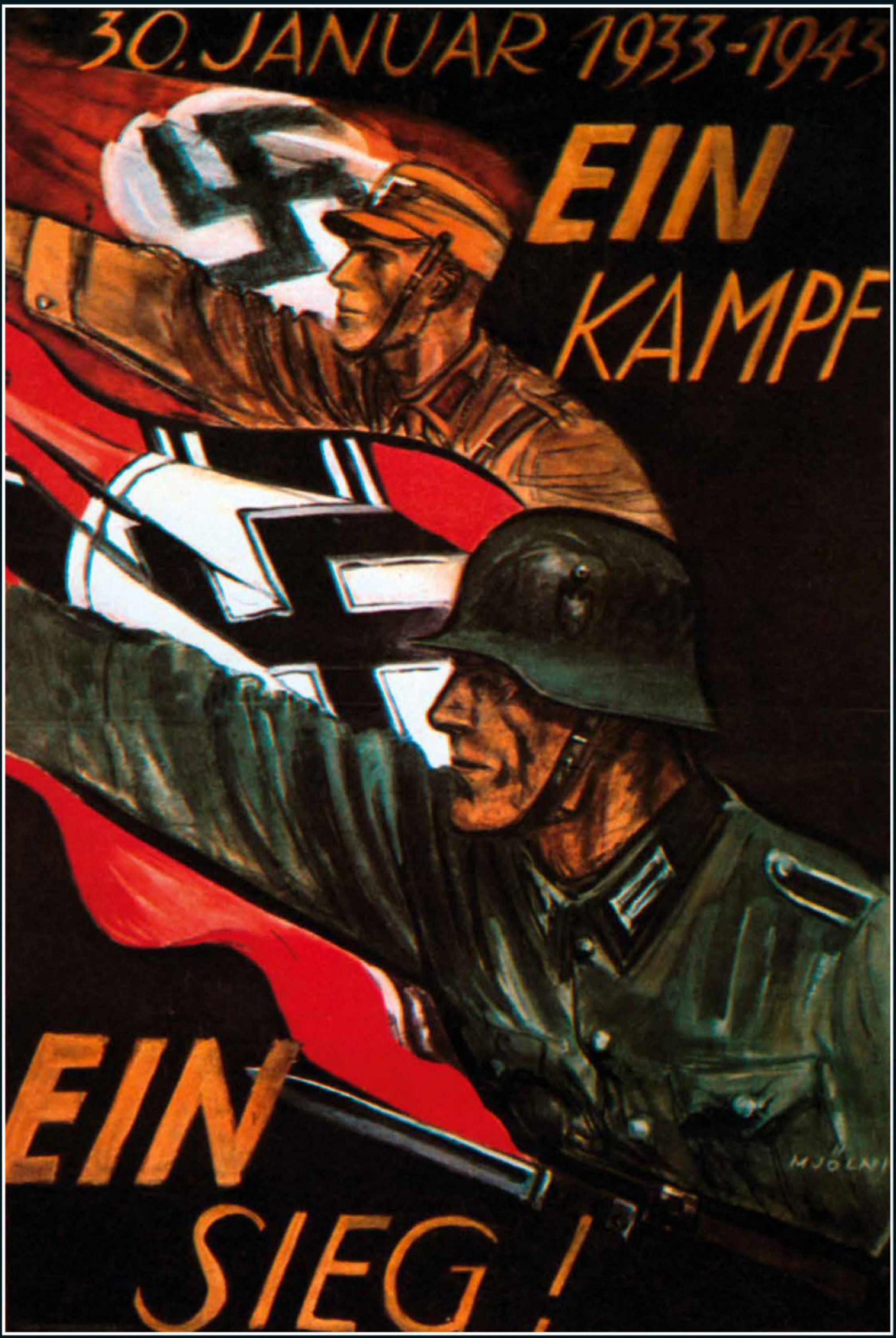
FEMALE GAZE

Posters played on the fears of economically deprived women during the Depression

At the height of the economic crisis in Germany, in 1932 some 6 million people were unemployed across the country, leading to widespread poverty. The Nazis played on the hardships suffered by so much of the population, using posters to declare that only Hitler and his party could lift the country – and its citizens and their families – out of the deprivation that afflicted so many.

To maximise the impact, campaigns were cannily targeted, using images, language and themes to appeal to specific groups .This example, aimed at women, proclaims: "Frauen! Denkt an Eure Kinder!" ("Women! Think of your children!"). The picture shows a young family – a dejected, unemployed father, an anxious mother and two small children – with the clear message to "save the German family". The suggestion being that voting for Hitler was the best way to secure a brighter future for the nation's children.



FIGHTING TALK

Posters were deployed to boost public morale during wartime

In this “Ein Kampf, Ein Sieg!” (“One Struggle, One Victory!”) poster designed by Hans Schweitzer in 1943, a brown-shirted member of the *Sturmabteilung* (Stormtroopers, the paramilitary force that played a key role in Hitler’s rise to power) joins a Wehrmacht solder in stretching his right arm in a Hitler salute beside swastika flags.

The dates at the top, 30 January 1933–1943, imply that the war was simply an extension of Hitler’s continued efforts, right from the moment he took power, to make Germany great and to defeat its enemies. This evokes the sense of a continued battle from the early days of Nazi political success to projected victory in the war.

This strikingly martial and belligerent poster was intended to bolster endurance among the German people by reinforcing the prowess, fortitude and ideological determination of German soldiers. It was one of many designed to boost morale and dictate the public narrative about the progress of the war.

GETTY IMAGES

ANTISEMITIC ART

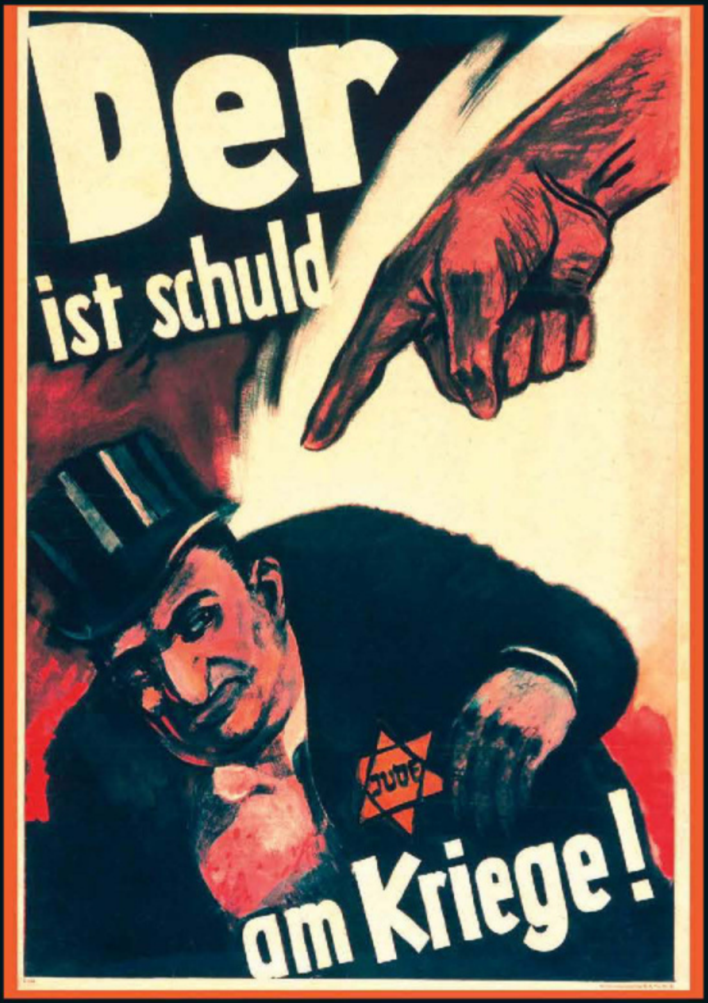
Nazi posters painted Jews as the root of Germany's economic and political problems

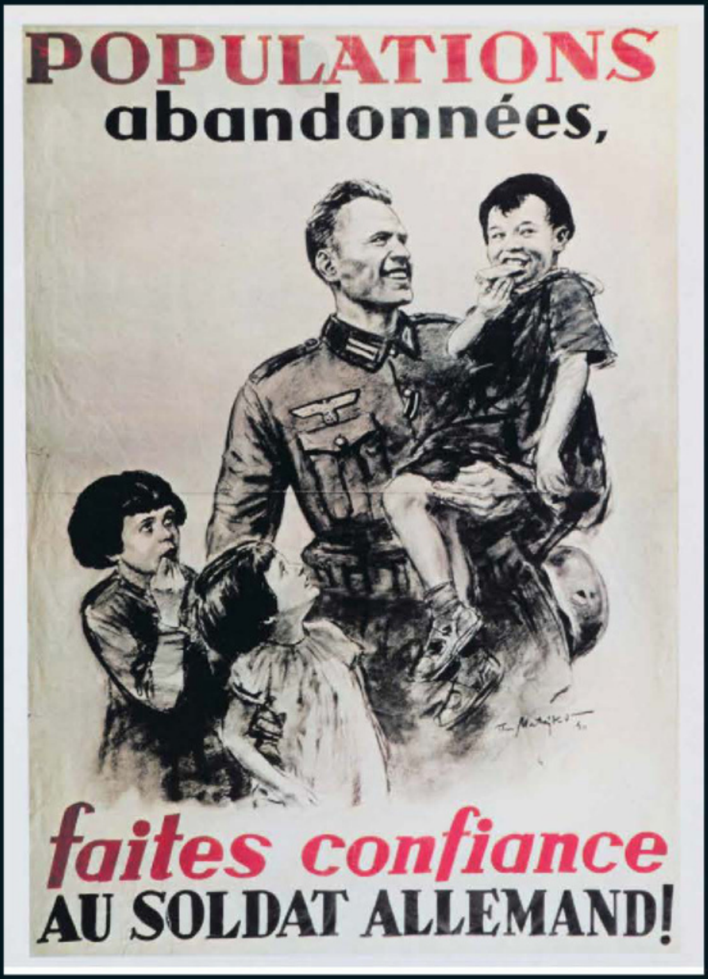
In Nazi propaganda, the Jew was frequently used as a scapegoat for all that had gone wrong in Germany. In his writings and speeches, Hitler repeatedly blamed the Jews for both the disaster of the First World War and the outbreak of the Second.

Using lurid colours to highlight the alarming nature of the Jewish 'enemy', antisemitic posters appeared on the streets of Germany and across Nazi-occupied territories to try to influence the public as they went about their daily activities.

This 1943 example by Hans Schweitzer epitomises the themes and style. It features a caricature of the 'capitalist' Jew, presented as hook-nosed, fat and repellent in his black hat and suit, wearing a yellow Star of David bearing the word "Jude" ("Jew").

The text makes no bones about the perceived culpability of the Jews. "Der ist schuld am Kriege!" ("He is responsible for the war!"), it shouts, the word "Der" ("He") presented in a much larger font size to emphasise who's to blame for the conflict.





BRIDGEMAN/ALAMY

AMIABLE OCCUPATION

The Nazis attempted to pacify the civilian inhabitants of the countries they invaded

The Nazi regime was keen to extol the benefits of occupation to the populations of some lands its troops invaded. For example, in this positively cheerful poster from 1940 by Theo Matejko, aimed at civilians in occupied France, a German soldier is shown holding a smiling French child munching a piece of bread, with two more French youngsters gazing hopefully up at him.

The caption, in red and black lettering, reads: "Populations abandonnées, faites confiance au soldat allemand!" ("Abandoned populations, place your trust in the German soldier!"). Such calculated propaganda, offering reassurances about the occupying forces, belied the truth of their aims.

This gentle image of a German soldier was very different from those portrayed on propaganda posters distributed in Germany – such as the one shown on the opposite page – which showed the Wehrmacht as ruthlessly determined in the face of its enemies. Slogans intended for a German audience were powerful and memorable: "Life or Death", "For Freedom and Life", "Perish Judah", "Victory at any Price".

Lisa Pine is a fellow of the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London. Her most recent book (co-authored with Kees Boterbloem) is *Soviet and Nazi Posters: Propaganda and Policies* (Bloomsbury, 2025)

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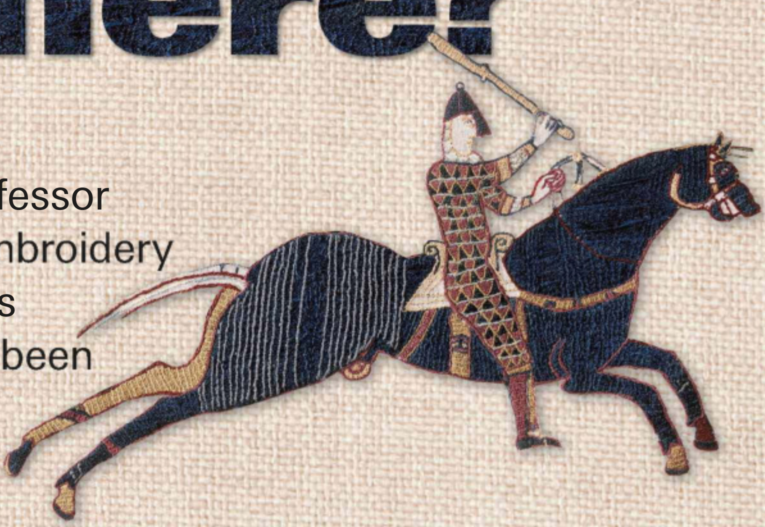
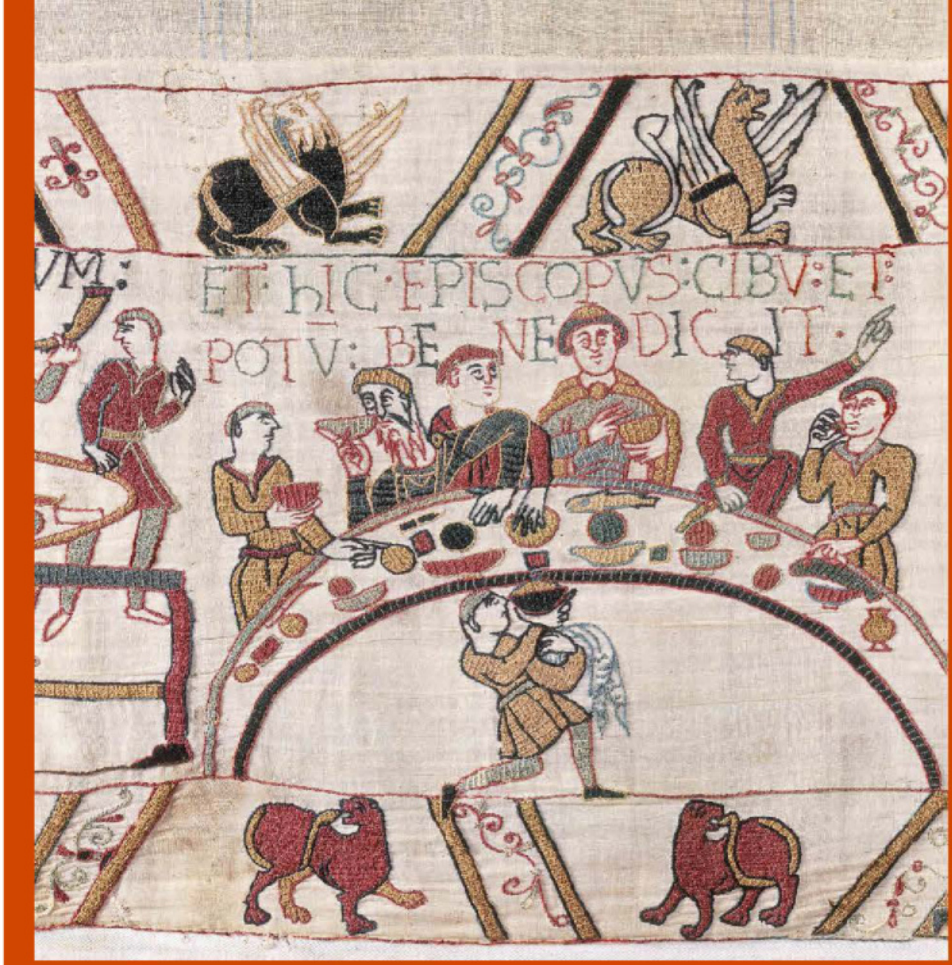
Just how many Bayeux Tapestries were there?



As a new theory, put forward by Professor John Blair, questions whether the embroidery was unique, **David Musgrove** asks historians whether there could have been more than one 'Bayeux Tapestry'

BAYEUX MUSEUM/DREAMSTIME



Bishop Odo, William's half-brother, says grace before a feast. It's thought that Odo commissioned the Tapestry to be displayed in his new cathedral in Bayeux

BAYEUX MUSEUM

The Bayeux Tapestry is an amazing artefact – and it's exceptional not least because of its very existence today. Precious few pieces of embroidery from the medieval period survive, let alone ones that are almost 70 metres long. And, of course, the story it tells – of the conquest of England by the Normans – is one of immense historical significance. So we rightly celebrate it, and excitement about its forthcoming loan from Bayeux to the British Museum is high.

But what if this artefact wasn't really so very exceptional at the time it was made? What if it was just one of several embroideries produced to commemorate the Norman victory over the English at the battle of Hastings in October 1066?

Professor John Blair, an expert in the Anglo-Saxon period at the University of Oxford, believes that might be the case.

"This is a reaction against the idea that the Tapestry had to be something extraordinary or unique, beyond the fact that it is an extraordinary and unique survival," he says. "There are abundant references to decorative domestic hangings, but of course they had virtually zero chance of survival. The Tapestry is a wonderful piece of design, but the actual stitching isn't particularly fine, and a big team of embroiderers in a workshop could have done it quite expeditiously."

Purported patron

Why did the Tapestry survive when so few other embroideries did? Well, most scholars agree that it was probably made some time after the battle that it records, so in the mid-late 11th century, and likely on the orders of – or to curry favour with – Bishop Odo of Bayeux.

Odo, the half-brother of William the Conqueror, was made Earl of Kent after the conquest. The case for him being the Tapestry's patron rests on the fact that he plays a particularly prominent role in the embroidery. Additionally, three lower-profile characters called Wadard, Vital and Turold are specifically (and surprisingly, given their status and role in the story) named in the Tapestry. These three men are thought to have been Odo's followers.

One line of thought suggests that the Tapestry was made to be displayed in Odo's new cathedral in Bayeux on its consecration in 1077. We know nothing of what happened to the embroidery in the four centuries that followed – until the late 15th century, when we have a documentary reference to it in an inventory of that cathedral, noting that it was displayed annually on a specific feast day. It's possible that the Tapestry survived for such a long time because, except for its annual airing, it was kept in a chest in the church. It therefore wasn't subjected to the wear and tear of daily display that might have caused other contemporary embroideries to fray and fall apart. One theory even has it that the Tapestry might have been walled up in a crypt below Bayeux Cathedral for centuries.

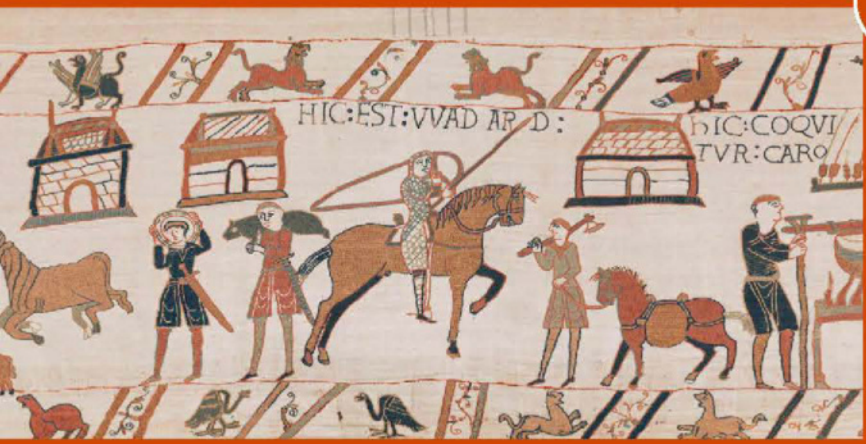
"There might have been a set of stock designs, which the workshop then customised for each patron"

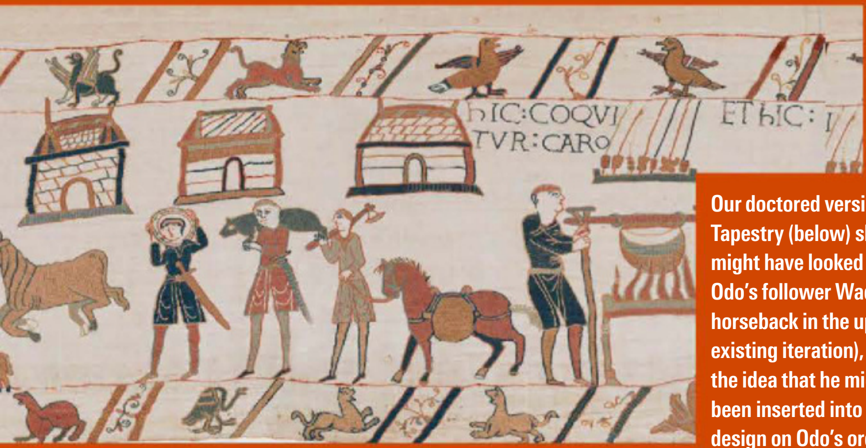
So, if Professor Blair is right in his theory that the uniqueness of the Tapestry rests principally in its survival, what does he think about its original manufacture? Where was it made, by whom – and was it one of a kind?

"Since it seems most unlikely that none of the other members of the Norman elite had embroidered hangings representing the Conquest," he explains, "the possibility struck me that there might have been a set of stock designs, which the workshop then customised for each individual patron: we just happen to have the one made for Odo.

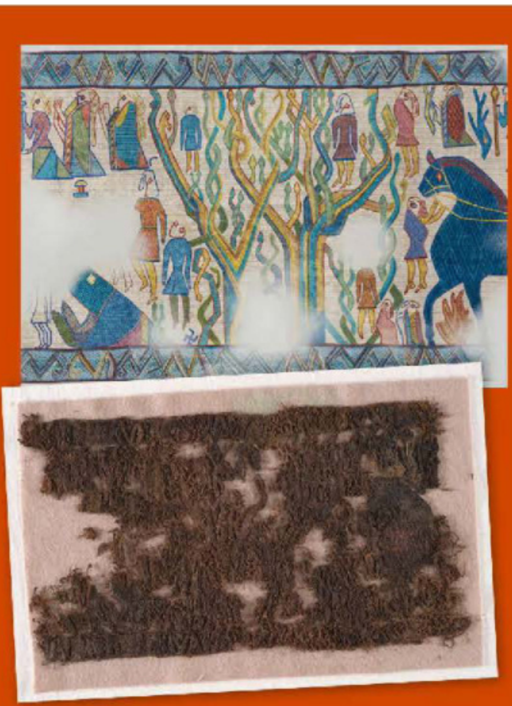
"On that argument, the scenes highlighting Odo – the meal before the battle, Odo brandishing his club, and so on – and Odo's named followers Wadard, Vital and Turold would be insertions into the standard sequence," he continues. "To take that further would need a closer analysis of design, sequence, correlation with the

Unravelling the Bayeux Tapestry
Take a deep dive into the embroidery's history with our podcast series: *historyextra.com/bayeux-series*





Our doctored version of the Tapestry (below) shows how it might have looked without Odo's follower Wadard (on horseback in the upper, existing iteration), illustrating the idea that he might have been inserted into a stock design on Odo's orders



TOP **A reconstruction of a woven tapestry found in the ninth-century Oseberg ship burial in Norway, reflecting the tradition of telling heroic stories through textiles**
ABOVE **The same section of the Oseberg ship tapestry in its current state**

borders and so on than I have done. But the Wadard scene definitely does have possibilities, since the mounted knight captioned 'Hic est Wadard' does rather look as though he has been interposed into a sequence of three houses and three followers."

To see how that might have worked, we've doctored that section of the Tapestry (above) so that you can compare the original sequence with a version in which the mounted Wadard has been removed.

Mass production

Gale Owen-Crocker – professor emerita of the University of Manchester, one of the most respected and well-published Tapestry scholars, and author of the forthcoming book *The Design of the Bayeux Tapestry* – likes the idea. "I am sure that there were workshops making these woollen hangings," she says. "The workmanship is too assured for the Bayeux Tapestry to be a one-off."

She has previously argued, along with her co-author, Maggie Kneen, that the Tapestry designers employed templates for the motifs and images that were most likely drawn onto the linen cloth as guides for the final stitching by the embroiderers. That, too, accords with Professor Blair's theory.

Manchester Metropolitan University's Dr Alexandra Makin, an authority on early medieval embroidery and author of *The Lost Art of the Anglo-Saxon World*, is minded to agree in broad terms:

"There's no denying that the Bayeux Tapestry is an important embroidery, but we have evidence that indicates wall hangings that told stories were a popular way of memorialising the heroic deeds of family members," she says. "An example is the Byrhtnoth wall hanging that was made by that ealdorman's wife, Ælflæd, and possibly other women in the household. It depicted the 'great deeds' of the ealdorman, and was given to the monastery at Ely at some point after his death at the battle of Maldon in 991.

"Meanwhile, in a poem written by Baudri of Bourgueil to William the Conqueror's daughter, Adela of Blois, Baudri describes three different wall hangings, one of which is very similar to the Bayeux Tapestry," she adds.

"The way the Bayeux Tapestry's narrative is set out also brings to mind the woven tapestries found in the ninth-century Oseberg ship burial in Norway, which are thought to tell stories relating to warrior ideology in the Viking world," Dr Makin continues. "The Bayeux Tapestry sits in a long tradition of telling heroic stories through textiles, so early medieval people were well aware of this and understood what it was telling them. This also suggests that

Bayeux Cathedral, consecrated in 1077 by Bishop Odo but largely reconstructed in the 13th century

ALAMY/STIG SAXEGAARD & MUSEUM OF THE VIKING AGE, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO/GETTY IMAGES

other people could have commissioned embroidered or woven wall hangings to tell their own story of what happened in 1066. Whether these were as big as the Bayeux Tapestry is another question."

According to Dr Makin, the way the embroidery was made lent itself ideally to the purpose for which it was designed. "The materials and stitches used to create the Bayeux Tapestry are perfect for the job," she says. "They are bold, quick to work, cover the ground fabric easily and would be seen from a distance. This is not a fine piece of work like the 10th-century gold-and-silk embroidered stole, maniple and ribbons found in the tomb of St Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral – but using tiny stitches would not have worked for a wall hanging that was meant to be seen by lots of people at a distance.

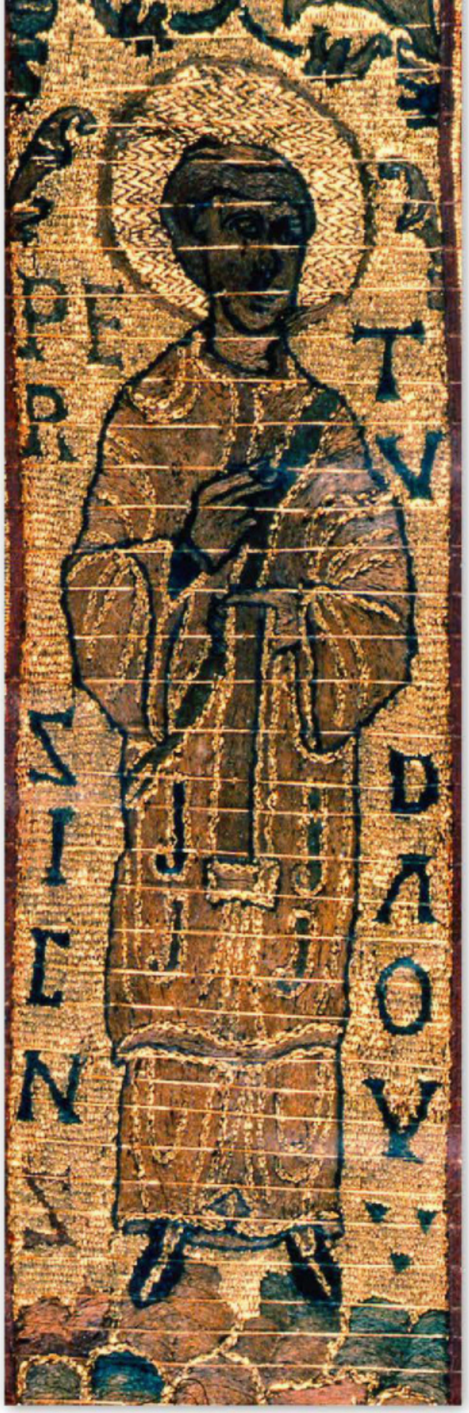
"When the stitching is examined, its precise execution, and the economical use of thread, demonstrates that the Bayeux Tapestry is an accomplished piece of work," Dr Makin concludes. "But we simply cannot compare it to pieces made from gold and silk threads. They were meant to do a different job."

Evidence for uniqueness

Professor Michael Lewis, another leading Tapestry expert based at the British Museum, is less convinced by Professor Blair's theory. He contends that Bishop Odo's presumed key role in the making of the Tapestry actually argues for it being a one-off embroidery:

"We know from Domesday Book that Bishop Odo, the Tapestry's likely patron, was a cultured man with the considerable wealth needed for the creation of a monumental artwork like the Bayeux embroidery," he says. "Surely it was his unique position as Earl of Kent that also enabled access to the illuminated manuscripts that were evidently used in the Tapestry's designs. Perhaps he could have granted similar access to other potential patrons – but is that likely or realistic?

"Another aspect to consider – key, perhaps – is whether the Tapestry was ever actually used for its original purpose, presumably to be displayed from place to place as an advocacy piece for Odo's role in the Conquest," he continues. "The likely period of its creation (1072–77) was within a new political environment in which William was moving towards a more oppressive regime than in the early days of the Conquest. Yet the Tapestry's story seems to reflect a pre-1070s narrative, with William hoping to bring the English around by more persuasive means. So maybe it was never toured [because it didn't reflect the newly prevailing narrative] and was unlikely to be emulated."



The 10th-century maniple found in the tomb of St Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral exhibits much finer needlework than the Bayeux Tapestry

STIG SAXEGAARD OG KULTURHISTORISK MUSEUM/BAYEUX MUSEUM

If Professor Blair's theory does hold water, it demands that we consider the Tapestry in a different light

Professor Lewis further wonders whether the scale of the embroidery and, thus, the resources required would have made duplicate versions less likely:

"It is true that the Bayeux embroidery uses relatively simple materials – flax for linen, wool for its threads, and plant material as dyes – but its scale, which could have been even larger than its extant 70m, suggests a different level of resources than might have been typical," he notes. "This has not been explored in any meaningful way, and surely it is an opportunity not to be missed [when the Tapestry is conserved in 2027] for scientifically investigating its materiality?"

If Professor Blair's theory does hold water – and clearly more research is needed to bolster the case – it demands that we consider the Tapestry and its message in a different light. As it stands, the Bayeux Tapestry is a key source for our understanding of the Norman conquest. The narrative it offers, which is at once celebratory for Duke William, conciliatory towards King Harold, and exclusionary of other dimensions to the story – the most obvious omission being Harald Hardrada's invasion in northern England before Hastings – has had a significant influence on the way we see 1066. If it was only one of a number of similar but different embroideries, then we need to review our interpretative framework, and consider why this particular version showed this particular narrative.

"Should this idea turn out to be right, it would emphasise both the sophistication and the complexity of 11th-century life, with major embroideries produced for several aristocratic households on a factory-line basis," Professor Blair remarks. "When trying to understand material culture in the early Middle Ages, we have to remember what a minute and unrepresentative sample has come down to us."

Hopefully, this article might lead to further research on this interesting theory. In the meantime, if anyone reading happens to be descended from one of the leading Norman families of the 11th century and has an unopened chest lying around, please feel free to have a look – and get in touch if it contains a 70 metres long embroidery.

Dr David Musgrove is content director of *BBC History Magazine* and HistoryExtra.com, and co-author, with Michael Lewis, of *The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry* (Thames & Hudson, 2021)

Watch experts explore questions about the embroidery in the BBC Four programme **Mysteries of the Bayeux Tapestry**: *bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0015nnc*

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Above: A man carries a wounded child into the MSF-run clinic at Rafah Indonesian Field Hospital in Gaza, 27 December 2023. Photograph MSF

The lives we save start with the gifts you leave

DR RACHAEL CRAVEN
MSF ANAESTHETIST

“When you are working as a doctor in a conflict zone, one of the things you learn is how to manage a mass casualty incident. This is when a large number of severely wounded people who have been caught up in an explosion, a shooting or a bomb blast all arrive at your hospital within a short period of time. When I was working at MSF’s hospital in the Yemeni city of Aden, we had to treat upwards of 50 people in the aftermath of one explosion.

In a situation like that, you can’t just rush into the single operating theatre with the first wounded people who arrive – you need to triage the injured first to decide who most needs surgery.

If I was working in the UK, ambulance crews would carry out pre-hospital triage and I would be confident that we had the resources and capacity to conduct multiple surgeries at the same time. But in a conflict zone such as Yemen, you don’t have those resources. The aftermath of an explosion is generally chaos. There are no ambulances, there is little communication from the scene, and the first people to arrive at hospital are often the least badly injured, as they’ve managed to walk or get a passer-by to help them.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Whether I was in Syria or Libya or Yemen, if one or two people came in with blast injuries, in the back of my mind I always expected that more were on the way and that they would probably be in worse shape.

In Yemen, we worked as a team to triage the wounded and we ensured that those who went into theatre first were the most badly injured.

Sharing that knowledge with the teams you work with is central to the way MSF operates. I was in Yemen to provide teaching in intensive care for the junior doctors at the hospital, most of whom hadn’t been able to finish their training because of the conflict.

We focus a lot of attention on training and mentoring local staff. It’s a way for us to stand in solidarity with the people we work with and to invest in their – and their country’s – future. It’s work that will continue to save lives long after MSF has left.

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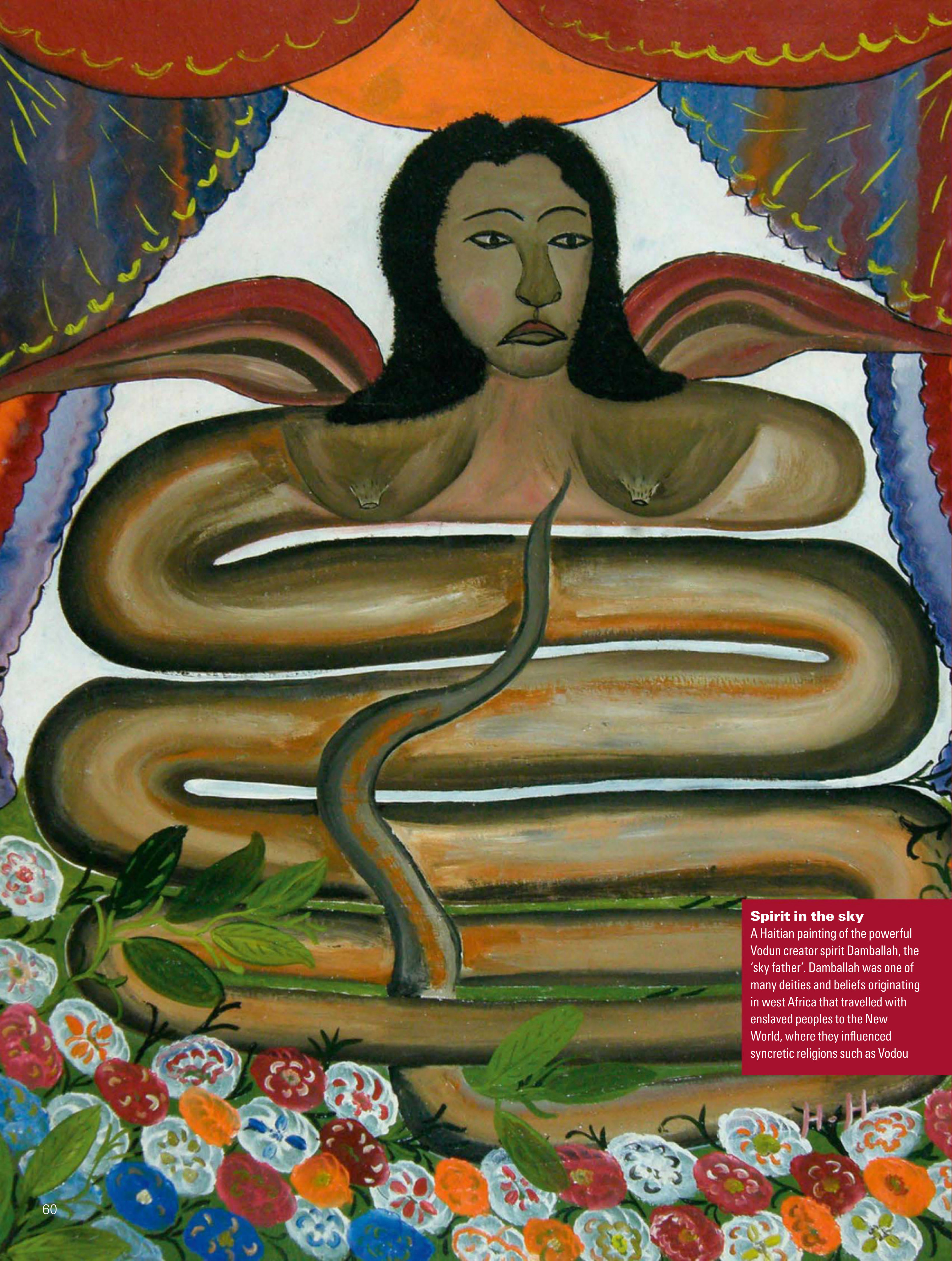


Spirit in the sky

A Haitian painting of the powerful Vodun creator spirit Damballah, the 'sky father'. Damballah was one of many deities and beliefs originating in west Africa that travelled with enslaved peoples to the New World, where they influenced syncretic religions such as Vodou

From sexual orgies to Satan incarnated as a snake, lurid depictions of 'voodoo' in North America long titillated and shocked readers. As **David G Cox** explains, they were also wielded as justifications for racist oppression during the social and political upheavals of the 19th-century US

Linked beliefs
Chained *bocio* (protective figures) of the Vodun religion of the Fon people of southern Benin. The chains are symbolic both of slavery and of Gu, the *vodu* (spirit) of iron and war

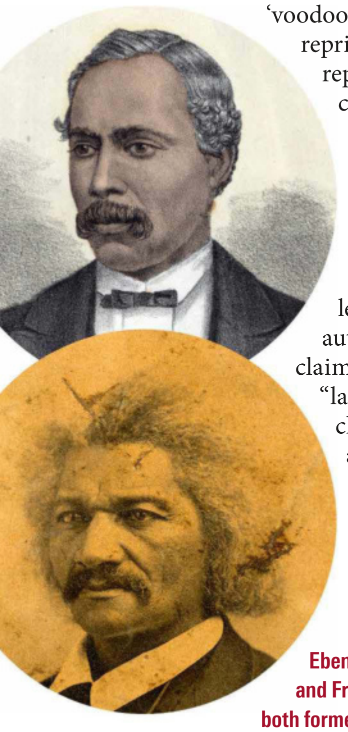
ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

On 2 January 1893, the black American abolitionist and reformer Frederick Douglass delivered a lecture on Haiti to an audience in Chicago. It was widely alleged, he reflected, that the Caribbean republic was riddled with “voodooism, fetishism, serpent worship and cannibalism”, and that “little children are fatted for slaughter and offered as sacrifices to their voodoo deities”.

Such claims, Douglass declared, were false. He told his listeners that, while serving as US minister (effectively, ambassador) to Haiti between 1889 and 1891, he found no evidence of ritual sacrifice, despite diligent investigation.

By the time Douglass spoke in Chicago, the idea of Haitian ‘voodoo’ as a murderous cult was lodged in the American public consciousness. As he noted, the features of this myth would have been familiar to many. According to scores of white writers at the turn of the 20th century, ‘voodoo’ was an imported African religion devoted to the worship of Satan incarnated as a snake. ‘Voodoo’ ceremonies, it was claimed, consisted of frenzied dances, sexual orgies and the ritual sacrifice of animals or humans followed by the consumption of their bodies or blood. The priests and priestesses of this imaginary faith were said to be the real rulers of Haiti, holding all its citizens – from presidents to peasants – in the grip of terror.

In 1901, claims about Haitian ‘voodoo’ coalesced in a widely reprinted newspaper report on the “demoniacal orgies” of this purported “devil’s cult”. Supposedly reproducing the findings of the famous American geologist and traveller Robert Hill, the author of the piece claimed not only that “large numbers of young children are offered up annually in Haiti as sacrifices to the Great Yellow Snake” but also that “mothers frequently dedicate their infants at birth to this purpose”.



Ebenezer Bassett (top) and Frederick Douglass, both former US ambassadors to Haiti, denounced claims that the black-led Caribbean nation was a hotbed of ‘voodoo’ cannibalism and human sacrifice

Claims about Haitian ‘voodoo’ coalesced in a newspaper report on the “demoniacal orgies” of this purported “devil’s cult”

The article provoked an incredulous response from Ebenezer Bassett who, as US minister to Haiti between 1869 and 1877, was the first black American diplomat. Having lived there for more than a decade, and speaking fluent French, Bassett – like Douglass – could claim authority on the question of Haitian religion.

As Bassett knew, “the whole story about cannibalism in Haiti is no more than a myth which, like other myths, has gained credence by persistent repetition”. Casting doubt on the veracity of the report, he noted that Robert Hill had refuted the existence of Haitian cannibalism in his recent Caribbean travel narrative, and that the claims of the article were “in full accord with – it is better not to say that they are probably based upon – Sir Spenser St John’s book”.

Lurid inventions

Spenser St John was a British diplomat and former chargé d’affaires in Haiti, and the book in question was *Hayti, or, The Black Republic*. First published in 1884, it made a deep impression on US journalism, providing the blueprint for a plethora of articles that, though claiming originality, did little more than summarise, in increasingly lurid terms, its lengthy chapter on “Vaudoux Worship and Cannibalism”.

Up to this point, I have placed ‘voodoo’ in quotation marks, not only to suggest that it was a figment of white imaginations but also to differentiate it from Vodou, the African-derived religion genuinely practised by Haitians. Much of this religion can be traced to west and west-central Africa. It contains elements of the religions practised during the era of slavery by the Aja and Fon peoples of the Bight of Benin (*vodu* is the Fon word for spirit), as well as of others from the kingdom of Kongo.

However, Vodou was not, as 19th-century white commentators claimed, a direct African import. It was a product of the New World melting pot – a dynamic blend of the religions of enslaved Africans and the Christianity of their European enslavers. In this respect, Vodou has much in common with other black diasporic religions including Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé and Jamaican Obeah. Like those, Vodou helped people of African origin survive the brutality of Atlantic slavery.

In the Victorian age, white people on both sides of the Atlantic ignored the vibrant realities of Vodou, dwelling instead on its demonic imagined double: ‘voodoo’. Why were they so keen to defame Haitian religion? Frederick Douglass had the answer. “Haiti is black,” he declared in Chicago, “and we [Americans] have not yet forgiven Haiti for being black.”

Between 1791 and 1804, enslaved and free people of colour rose against the French colonial government of Saint-Domingue. The revolution resulted in the abolition of slavery and independence for the colony. Renamed Haiti, it became the world’s only black republic. Desperate to demonstrate that people of African descent were incapable of self-government, white supremacists spent the next century defaming Haiti, presenting it – in the words of Douglass – as a “very hell of horrors”.

As the 20th century approached, the idea that the world could be divided into races whose members shared the same essential traits was widely accepted. Thus, to opponents of black freedom in the US, Haitian ‘voodoo’ became proof that, without white control, black Americans would degenerate to savagery. As Douglass reflected, the black American could “never part with his identity and race”, meaning that the denial of Haitian civilisation was a denial of the “possibilities of the negro race generally”.

This backlash against black freedom explains why ‘voodoo’ first entered the American popular consciousness during the 1860s and 1870s, just as a series of constitutional amendments secured the abolition of slavery, along with the establishment of black citizenship and the enfranchisement of black men. As the author of an 1866 article in the *Memphis Appeal* proclaimed, ‘voodoo’ was “beginning to take hold among the negroes. Free them from the check which was once held over them, they have unlimited control over their baser passions, and now and then

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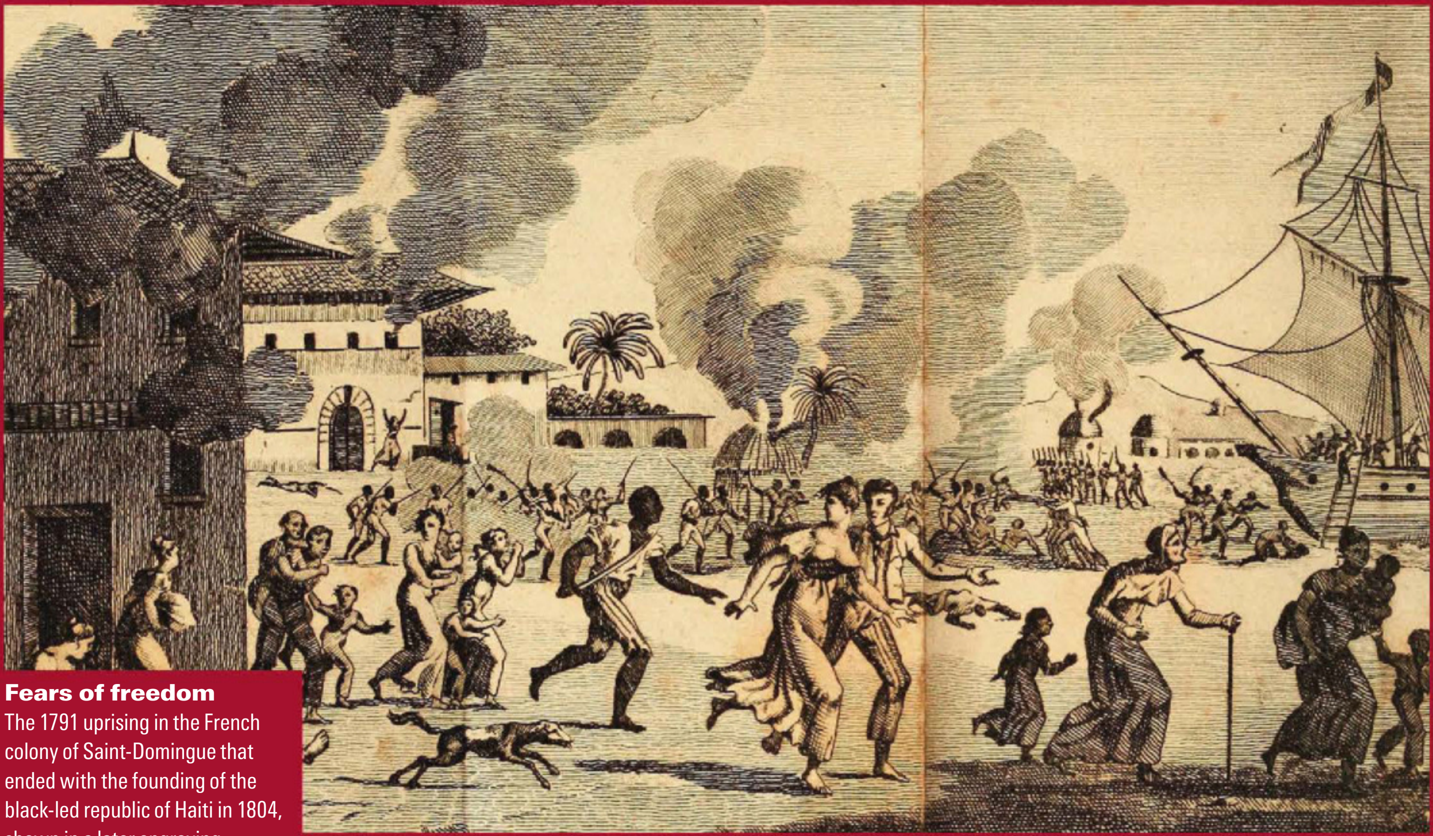
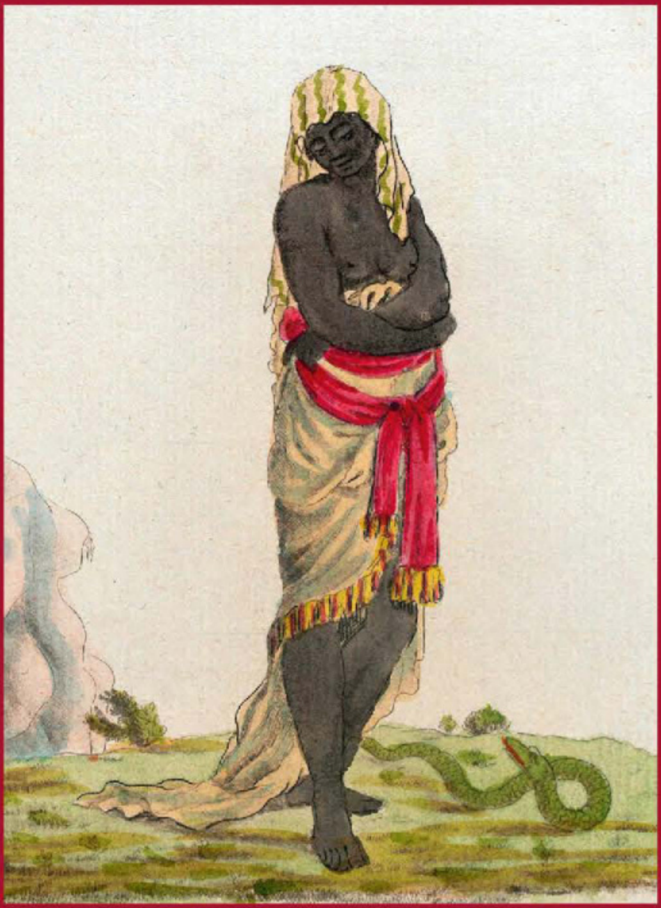


Fears of freedom The 1791 uprising in the French colony of Saint-Domingue that ended with the founding of the black-led republic of Haiti in 1804, shown in a later engraving amplifying fears of black violence



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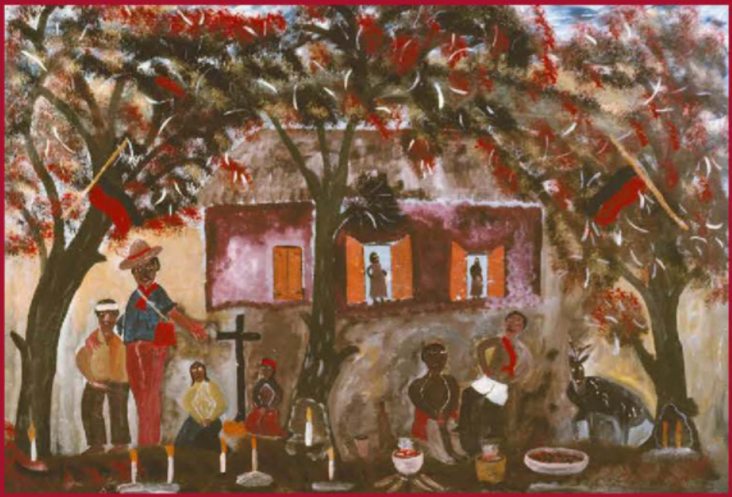
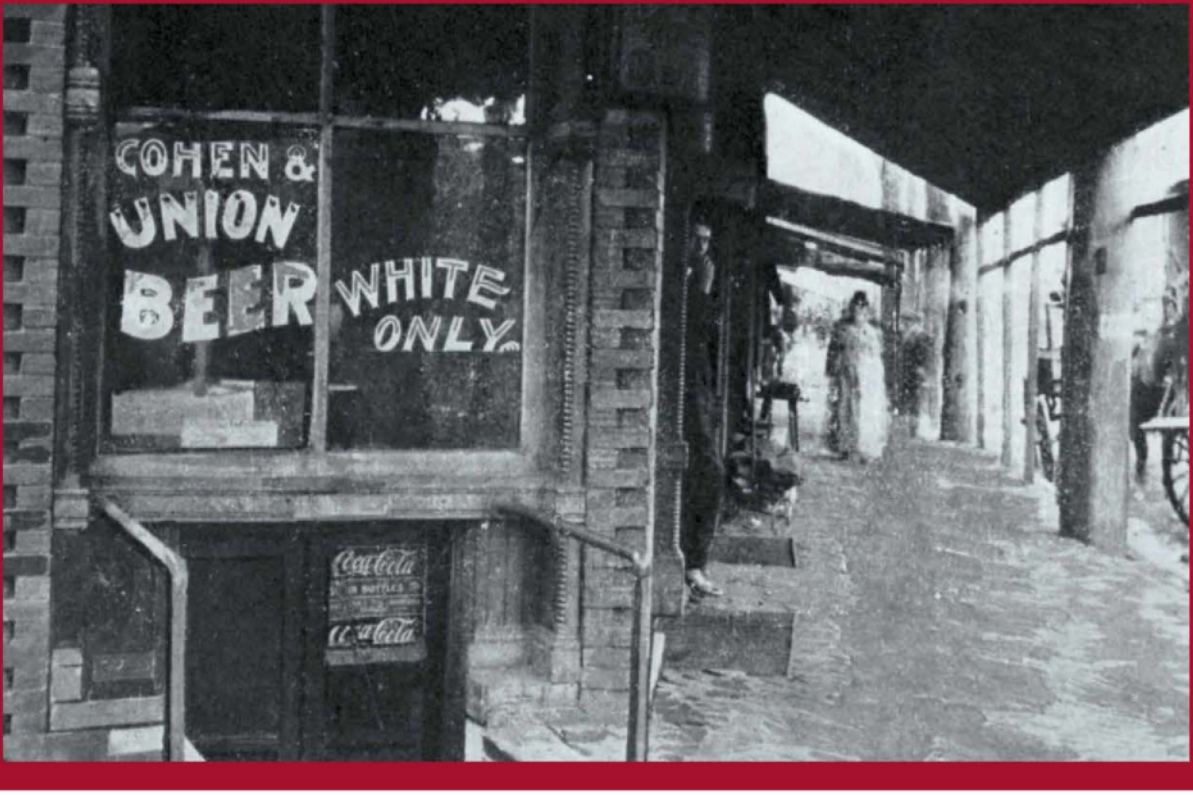
Spiritual strength A Vodun priestess from Ouidah, Benin, in 1797. During the era of slavery, Vodun – and related religions that emerged in the colonies, including Haitian Vodou – helped black people endure and resist oppression in both Africa and the New World



New World order A Vodou scene in Haiti, by renowned artist Hector Hyppolite. Lurid reports in US newspapers of 'voodoo' ceremonies were cited as proof that white control was necessary to prevent black Americans from degenerating into savagery

Blended beliefs A carved wooden relief of an orisha (divinity figure) of the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion, which, like Vodou, combines elements of west and central African beliefs with Catholic influences



Bitter brew
A white-only bar in Atlanta, 1908. White supremacists used Haitian 'voodoo' as a justification for segregationist policies

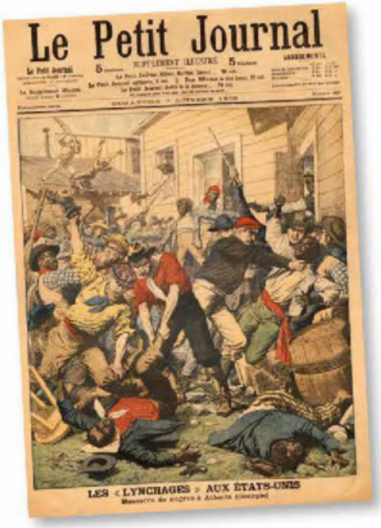
it bursts out, and proves that the worship of their barbaric fathers still runs in the blood of the Americanised negro."

Deluge of discourse

Initially, Americans writing about 'voodoo' focused on Louisiana and, particularly, New Orleans. A former French colony, Louisiana had a sizeable French-speaking population well into the 19th century. In the 1790s and early 19th century, this population had been bolstered by the arrival of up to 25,000 refugees from the Haitian Revolution, well over half of whom were enslaved. It is thus unsurprising that a reference to "an African deity called Vaudoo" appeared in a New Orleans newspaper as early as 1820.

However, from the 1880s onwards, thanks to Spenser St John, attention turned to 'voodoo' in Haiti. The press was swiftly saturated with reports depicting the Caribbean republic as a "land of blood" – with articles bearing headlines such as: "Haiti, a Brooding Nightmare of Savagery, Bloodshed, Cannibalism".

It is tempting to see this deluge of discourse as a reflection of US imperial designs on Haiti, which it occupied between 1915 and 1934. However, at the turn of the 20th century, Haitian 'voodoo' was most often invoked by white-supremacist Democrats who argued that Jim Crow laws and regulations – which, enacted from the late 19th century, disenfranchised black Americans and enforced their segregation from white people – were necessary to prevent similar savagery at home.



A French illustration of the 1906 Atlanta race riot, in which perhaps 25 black Americans were murdered following reports of black men attacking white women

African-derived spiritual beliefs played a part in almost every slave uprising in North America and the Caribbean

The peak of interest in Haitian 'voodoo' coincided with legal efforts to destroy the black vote in the South. Beginning with Mississippi in 1890, and ending with Georgia in 1906, southern legislatures drew up new state constitutions containing a plethora of voting restrictions. These were intended to disenfranchise black Americans without contravening the 15th Amendment of 1870, which made it unconstitutional to deprive the vote on the basis of race. In the halls of Congress, Democrats, including the Mississippi senator Hernando Money, cited the work of St John as supposed proof that the black American was no more than a "veneered savage". To the architects of Jim Crow, 'voodoo' was an ideological weapon.

Depictions of Haitian 'voodoo' worship, a potent brew of sex and violence, helped to sell newspapers in an age of sensationalist journalism. At the same time, they reinforced racist notions that everybody of African descent was inherently bestial, criminal and hypersexual. Depictions of orgiastic worship chimed with the myth that white women were in constant danger of the black 'beast rapist', which was used to justify Jim Crow and fuel violence against black Americans.

In a 1914 speech to Congress, the notoriously racist Mississippi senator James Vardaman made the connection explicit. St John, he claimed, had presented a "disgusting story of the worship of the voodoo and cannibalism, which he says is as common as [black] sexual crimes in the southern states of this republic".

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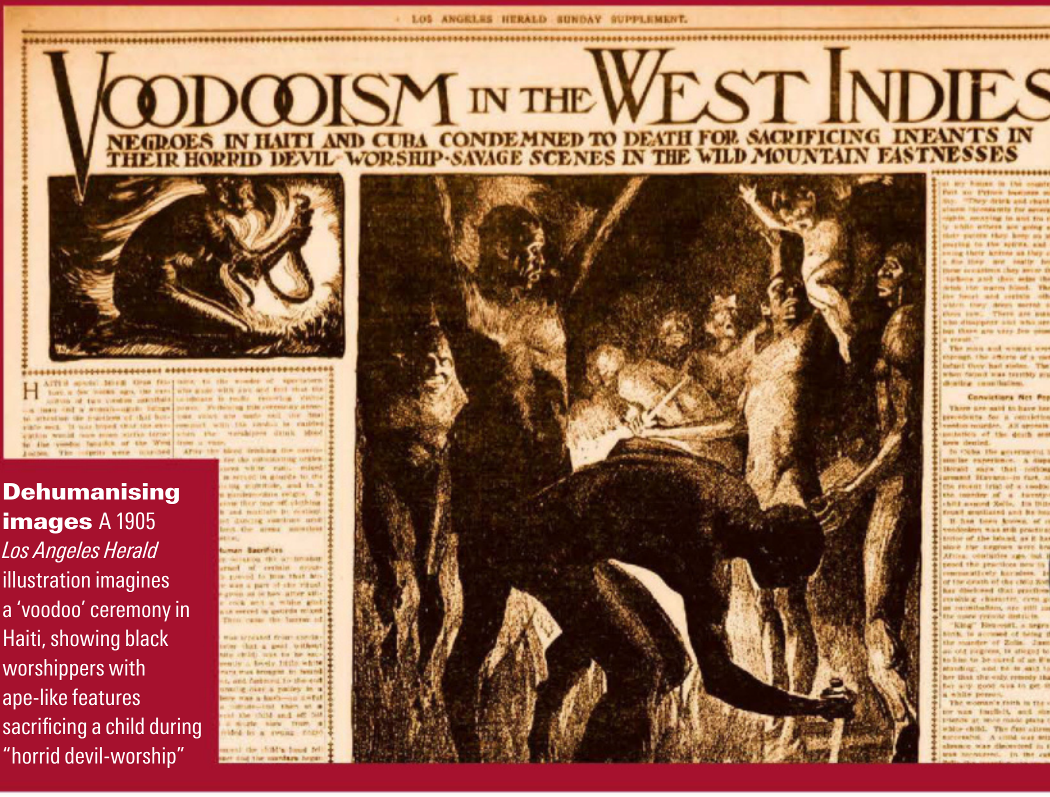

LOS ANGELES HERALD SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT.

VOODOOISM IN THE WEST INDIES

NEGROES IN HAITI AND CUBA CONDEMNED TO DEATH FOR SACRIFICING INFANTS IN THEIR HORRID DEVIL WORSHIP-SAVAGE SCENES IN THE WILD MOUNTAIN FASTNESSES

Dehumanising images A 1905 *Los Angeles Herald* illustration imagines a 'voodoo' ceremony in Haiti, showing black worshippers with ape-like features sacrificing a child during "horrid devil-worship"

Racist rhetoric Mississippi senator James Vardaman, who in 1914 told Congress that in Haiti "cannibalism… is as common as [black] sexual crimes in the southern states of this republic"

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Frequently portraying black worshippers as beasts and demons, the language used in depictions of Haitian 'voodoo' was dehumanising in the extreme. Written portrayals were sometimes accompanied by lurid illustrations, such as *A Voodoo Sacrifice,* published in the *Los Angeles Herald* in 1905 (above). A depiction of child sacrifice, the illustration included a worshipper with grotesquely ape-like features as well as a reptilian figure fixing the newspaper reader with an accusatory gaze, suggesting that she or he was an unwelcome witness to secret black rites.

Fears of black resistance

While ostensibly justifying Jim Crow, American depictions of Haitian Vodou betrayed acute white fears of black resistance. African-derived spiritual beliefs and practices played a part in almost every slave uprising in North America and the Caribbean. In 1822, protective charms were allegedly distributed among those involved in South Carolina's Denmark Vesey conspiracy, named after a free black man convicted of planning a major uprising of enslaved people. In Jamaica a little over 60 years earlier, the use of similar charms during the massive slave insurrection known as Tacky's Revolt prompted a British crackdown on Obeah.

For late 19th-century white Europeans and Americans, however, the dangerous character of black religion was most associated with the Haitian Revolution. By the end of the century, the idea had been enshrined in Haitian mythology that the revolution began with a Vodou ceremony in a forest named Bois-Caïman, during which a pig was sacrificed and a blood oath sworn.

Though Vodou certainly galvanised the Haitian Revolution, the reality of the Bois-Caïman ceremony has been debated by scholars, some of whom question the sources upon which the story is based.

White supremacists, however, had no interest in questions of historical accuracy, instead portraying Vodou as a death cult bent upon the annihilation of the white race. This accusation chimed with the widespread view that political equality in the US would lead to race war. In 1908, the *San Antonio Light* published what it claimed was a genuine Vodou chant invoking racial extermination, but which was almost certainly the product of a journalist's fevered imagination.

O-he! Papa Damba!
Down with whites and with mulattoes!
Burn them, shoot them, drown their women!
Help your blacks, your poor black children

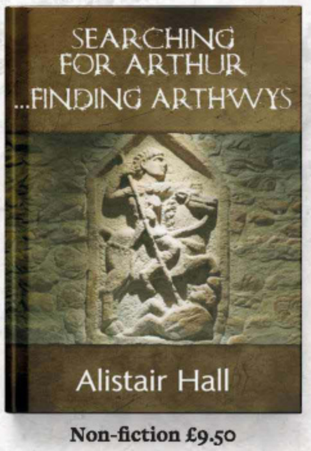
Circulated by those seeking to justify Jim Crow, tales of 'voodoo' sacrifice and cannibalism were shot through with white anxiety. These sanguinary stories may have facilitated a kind of psychological displacement. In other words, real white violence against African Americans was projected as imaginary black murder in the service of Satan.

In the turn-of-the-20th-century South, racial violence assumed unimaginable dimensions in the form of spectacle lynching: black Americans were tortured and murdered before white crowds that could number in the thousands. According to statistics compiled by the NAACP (the civil rights organisation founded in 1909 as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), at least 1,902 black Americans were lynched between 1890 and 1910. The affinities between these all-too-real rituals and fictional 'voodoo' ceremonies seem more than superficial, especially if we note – as many historians have – the religious symbolism and sacrificial dimensions of spectacle lynching.

This reign of racial terror troubled many white people, undermining their sense that they stood at the summit of human civilisation. Condemning the 1904 lynching of Luther Holbert of Mississippi, one newspaper editor wrote that "[t]he negroes, in their most bestial state of voodooism, could be guilty of nothing more savage and brutal." The editor's conclusion deliberately inverted the racist language of Democratic politicians such as Hernando Money. "The white man is given to much boasting," that journalist reflected, "but in many instances he is but a thinly veneered savage."

'Voodoo' gripped the public imagination because, while fuelling the violence upon which Jim Crow was built, it allowed many white Americans to imagine that it was not themselves but others who lived in a "land of blood". ◼

David G Cox is a lecturer in modern American history at the University of Southampton. His research for this article was supported by a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship


SEARCHING FOR ARTHUR ...FINDING ARTHWYS
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If the Matter of Britain is given a sensible timeline and fair consideration it is apparent that there was a proto-Arthur...

Whilst the Romans were struggling to contain the barbarians in the mid fifth-century a great grandson of Coel Hen (Old King Cole) brought the army of the north to the Midlands and combining first with Vortimer and subsequently Riothamus engaged the Saxons, who under Hengist had annexed almost the entire province of Flavia Caesariensis (Lincolnshire). *Searching for Arthur... Finding Arthwys* explores how the nascent kingdoms of the north are the source of the legends of King Arthur and explains how subsequent interpretations have misplaced these events and obscured their significance to the history of the Britons.

Alternatively, if you prefer your history fictionalised and garnished with legend read *The Genesis of Arthwys* and *The Rise of Arthwys* by Alistair Hall, both epic realisations of the brutal fifth century which tell the stories of the descendants of Coel Hen who after the withdrawal of the Romans stepped forward with their contemporaries to defend their homeland culminating in the defeat of the Saxons at the Battle of Mount Badon.

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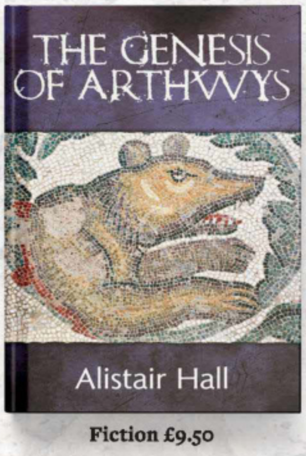
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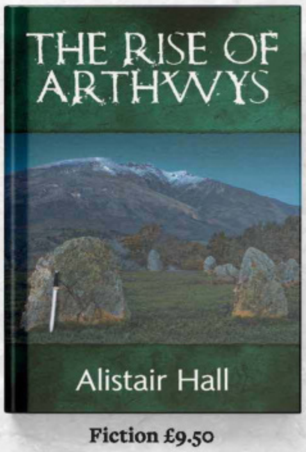
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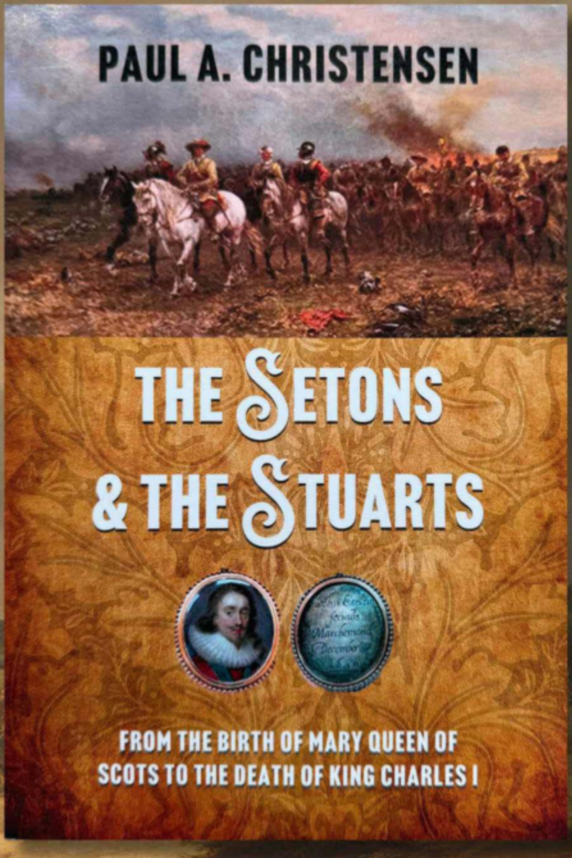
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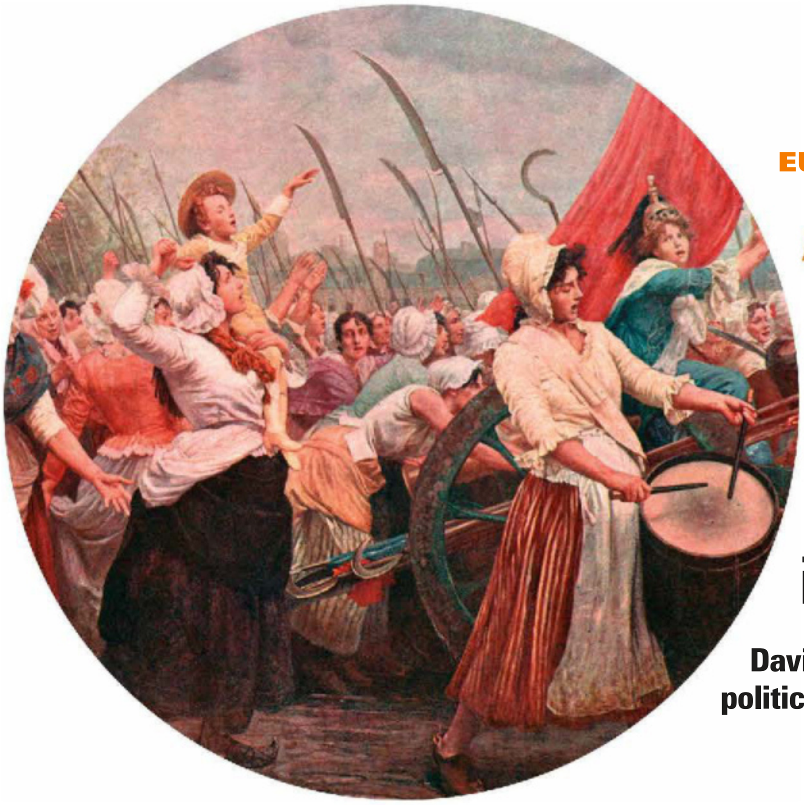
BOOKS

POLITICS

“Clerks, teachers, curators, priests and artists sustained a deeply violent regime”

Harriet Aldrich reviews an account of the popular support for Idi Amin's brutal dictatorship › page 76



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> “One of the intriguing points that emerges is the highly personal nature of political interactions”

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“There’s something about Sparta that brings out the best and the worst in historians”

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Janina Ramirez on the ways men have co-opted women’s stories to shape national identities

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“Women are entirely excluded from nation-building, yet the ultimate emblem of the nation is a woman”

JANINA RAMIREZ speaks to Danny Bird about how women and their stories have been co-opted and curated by men attempting to forge nations across Europe

Danny Bird What was the genesis of *Legenda*? Was there a moment when you knew you had to write this book?

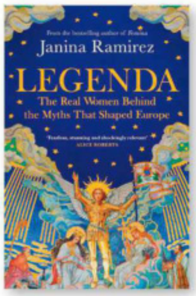
Janina Ramirez From the start of my academic career, I learned from [Palestinian-American literary critic and activist] Edward Said and others the value of acknowledging one’s perspective: being transparent about who you are, rather than claiming some sense of neutral empirical truth.

For me, identity rests on three pillars. First, I am a woman. Second, class: I come from an immigrant, working-class background. Third, heritage: Polish-Irish, born in Dubai, raised in the UK, married to a Spanish-Scot, with a distinctly European sense of self. With all that, I wasn’t going to get away without a Catholic upbringing: convent school, just very Roman Catholic foundations. I’m not practising now, but it gave me empathy for faith and an understanding of belief.

These roots inevitably shape my work. When I published *The Private Lives of the Saints* [in 2015], my aunt, a Franciscan missionary, told me how proud she was. I had to laugh because the book dismantled saintly myths rather than celebrating them. Yet she was right: I was still that Catholic schoolgirl, writing about religious figures, even as I reframed them.

Questions of nationality also ran through my research. My first book required careful choices of terms: ‘Irish’, ‘Welsh’, ‘Scottish’, ‘British Isles’ – each politically charged. By *Femina* [2022], the pattern was striking: nations everywhere reclaiming heritage, from Scandinavia’s Vikings to France’s Cathars.

The focus of my latest book crystallised while writing about [queen and saint] Jadwiga of Poland. My grandmother, who owned a bronze of Pope John Paul II, reminded me how faith and identity intertwine. In my lifetime, that pope canonised women I now study, using them to shape national narratives. So the direction of this new book was clear even as I finished the last one.


From the bestselling author of Femina
Janina Ramirez
LEGENDA
The Real Women Behind the Myths That Shaped Europe

Legenda: The Real Women Behind the Myths That Shaped Europe
by Janina Ramirez
(WH Allen, 480 pages, £25)

You explore how women such as Joan of Arc and Isabella of Castile became symbols of national identity. Do you think their stories continue to shape how nations see themselves today?

I open the book with one of [French far-right nationalist politician] Jean-Marie Le Pen’s impassioned rallies at the statue of Joan of Arc on the Place des Pyramides in Paris. So yes, her story remains relevant – mocked or taken seriously, but still shaping France’s political landscape.

After being expelled from the [far-right anti-immigrant] National Front, Le Pen founded an even harder-right party, naming it after Joan of Arc and making her its emblem. That’s how potent her image remains to French nationalists.

Similarly, Isabella of Castile’s influence endures. When I speak with Spanish friends, they describe how the Castilian dialect is still seen as the benchmark [rather than regional dialects such as Catalan or Galician] – much like in Britain, where London can feel like a ‘brain drain’ and doesn’t reflect life in the north, Cornwall or Kent. That sense of central dominance ties directly back to Isabella and the way she imposed her vision of Spain.

And that’s the heart of it: attempts to impose a single collective identity on diverse peoples – peoples with different regions, traditions and faiths – inevitably crack. Even in Isabella’s lifetime, that imposed single national identity fractured and was repeatedly reinforced, layer upon layer. We see the same dynamics now in places such as Catalonia, the Basque Country and Scotland. These identities don’t simply vanish; they resist, reassert themselves and continue to challenge imposed unity.

I’d love to explore how nations so often personify themselves as women – from Britannia to Marianne – embodying a strange mix of maternal or nurturing spirit, virginal purity, even martial strength. What do you think is going on there?

Brilliant question! I’m very fortunate to be a colleague in Oxford of Marina Warner, the doyenne of this subject. She has written on Joan of Arc, but also a wonderful book called *Monuments and Maidens*, which speaks directly to this point.

She shows how nations embody themselves in female form: the Statue of Liberty, Marianne in the Panthéon, Britannia looming in St Paul’s Cathedral. And you’re absolutely right: there’s a deep frustration here. The nation is imagined as a woman, yet women themselves had little to no role in building nations.

It’s a profound injustice: in virtually every revolutionary moment, women were excluded from shaping national identity. In France, ‘Liberty, equality, fraternity’ – that emphasis on brotherhood – was about raising up men, not women. Think of how the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* [1789] prompted the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* [1791] in response; the

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PROFILE

Janina Ramirez is a lecturer, author and broadcaster, and research fellow in the history of art at the University of Oxford. Her books include *Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages Through the Women Written Out of It* (Ebury, 2022) and *The Private Lives of the Saints: Power, Passion and Politics in Anglo-Saxon England* (WH Allen, 2015) author of that second declaration, Olympe de Gouges, was executed for it. Revolutions don't work for women; they offer no place for us.

Yet the most powerful symbol to unite people is often 'the mother'. That universal image, both compelling and emotionally resonant, becomes propaganda: to serve king and country is to serve one's motherland. Men are called to die for their 'mother', while real women are denied participation in politics, philosophy, architecture or law. That's the deep irony you've identified: women are entirely excluded from nation-building, yet the ultimate emblem of the nation is a woman.

Several of the women you write about pushed back against the expectations of their time. Why do you think some have become celebrated as heroines whereas others have been condemned?

We are still enthralled by the charismatic, the extreme, the outspoken. I don't understand why certain celebrities and influencers command such attention while thoughtful, rational voices struggle to be heard. We must be cautious about whom we choose to celebrate as heroes, both today and in the past. The figures who endure often do so because their stories are condensed into simple, powerful images that can be reproduced and instantly recognised.

Take Agustina of Aragón, for example. Many women fought in Zaragoza [against invading French forces] during the Peninsular War from 1808, yet she became iconic because painters such as Goya fixed her image: a small figure on a pile of bodies, lighting a cannon's fuse. That lodged itself in the public imagination – this is how legend works. When I began the book, I also considered including men such as Robin Hood or Alfred the Great, whose myths have likewise been reshaped into soundbites.

People prefer statues, posters and slogans to complex truths. They want heroes they can identify at a glance without grappling with the full picture. That's why I wrote the book: to question the stories we take as fact. Consider the Lady Godiva legend [in which the 11th-century noblewoman of Mercia rode naked through the streets of Coventry in order to win respite for its people from oppressive taxation by her husband, the earl]. The only factual link between the historical Godgifu and the tale we know is Coventry itself. Everything else is invention. I love stories, and I open each chapter with one, but my aim is to dig beneath them – to be forensic about who these figures really were. In doing so, they become more complex, more fascinating and ultimately more thrilling than the legends that have simplified them.

CONVENTION NATIONALE

Ironic icon Marianne, personification of the French Republic, in Paris's Panthéon. "Revolutions don't work for women; they offer no place for us," says Janina Ramirez

> **"At the same time as Charlemagne was trying to construct a Holy Roman Empire, Empress Irene was ruling in Constantinople – and viewing the Franks as peasants"**

Were there any unexpected objects or sources that illuminated the roles of women featured in your book?

Yes – particularly while researching the chapter on Greece, one of the hardest to write. The 1821 Greek revolt is often downplayed in accounts of nationhood. Because it was a rebellion against the Ottoman empire – against 'the east', rather than against monarchies in western Europe – it can feel like a different story from the Belgian, German or French struggles for democracy, and tends to be pushed to the margins. I wanted to foreground it. What struck me most was how this perspective connects to broader debates about Eurocentrism. Recently, at the Gloucester History Festival, I listened to Peter Frankopan, 10 years on from the publication of his book *The Silk Roads*, urging us not to be so western-focused, and Vince Cable, who echoed the same point in relation to China, India and Japan today.

I wanted to shift the narrative away from the familiar classical thread linking Europe to Rome and ancient Greece, and instead emphasise that, for much of medieval history, Constantinople (now Istanbul) was the true hub of civilisation and power. London and the north of Europe were seen as barbaric backwaters.

Greek identity in the 19th century was not just a Byronesque, romantic appeal to ancient culture. For Greeks, it was about reclaiming the legacy of Constantinople, which had fallen to the Ottomans in the 15th century.

Researching the role of women in Constantinople, I was struck by the extraordinary survival of coins, enamels, jewelled crosses – objects that in most revolutions would have been melted down, yet remained intact because the Ottomans largely ignored them. Among them are coins depicting the 11th-century sisters Zoe and Theodora (left) ruling with the male title 'emperor' of Byzantium, rather than 'empress'.

Their images, along with artefacts carried to places such as Georgia when it was ruled by Queen Tamar (reigned 1184–1213), are stark reminders that women could and did rule empires. Indeed, at the same time as Charlemagne was trying to construct a Holy Roman Empire [at the turn of the ninth century], Empress Irene was ruling in Constantinople, viewing the Franks as peasants on the fringes of civilisation.

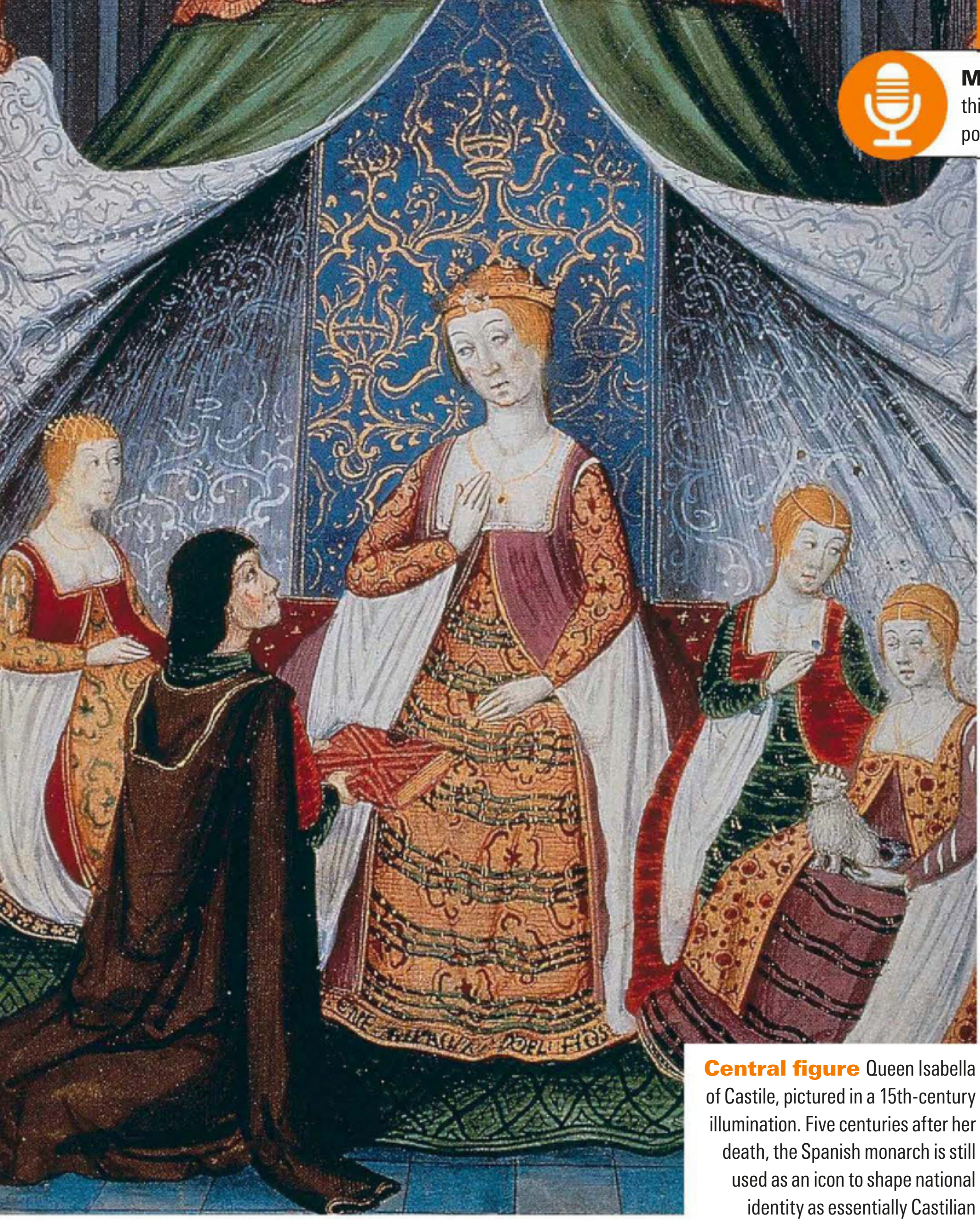
That chapter forced me to question western national narratives and to reflect on the cycles of rise and fall in world history. It also highlighted the need for humility in how we see our place in a global story that has always been in flux, and the importance of asking where women feature in that.

You also discuss the intersection where religious devotion and politics meet, through women such as Catherine of Siena. Today, would their faith make them seem radical or reactionary?

Catherine of Siena [14th-century mystic and letter-writer] is a fascinating and difficult figure to grasp. I suspect that she would now be seen as a radical extremist. Her influence grew rapidly from local

DREAMSTIME

Medieval trailblazers Listen to more from this interview with Janina Ramirez on a forthcoming podcast episode at *historyextra.com/podcast*



Central figure Queen Isabella of Castile, pictured in a 15th-century illumination. Five centuries after her death, the Spanish monarch is still used as an icon to shape national identity as essentially Castilian

TOPFOTO

notoriety to involvement in politics, family disputes and the affairs of the nobility. Rejecting the cloistered life of a nun, which she deemed too modest and hidden, she instead exploited the opportunities of the Dominican Third Order, which allowed women to live partly within the rhythms of monastic life while remaining active in the world – able to marry, raise families and pursue public roles.

Even this was too restrictive for Catherine. She craved visibility and seized every chance to place herself centre stage. Behind her was a group that recognised her potential and promoted her as a kind of spiritual influencer. With their support, she was propelled onto ever larger platforms, becoming more reactionary and extreme as her fame grew. Eventually, she had the ear of the pope and played a part in global politics.

It was a meteoric but tragic rise. Catherine's regime of intense self-mortification, involving starvation and other severe practices, destroyed her health and she died young [aged just 33, in 1380]. Ironically, in the medieval world, some of the very behaviours officially condemned – such as fasting and self-harm – often brought fame and were celebrated as marks of sanctity. Extreme acts, such as plunging into frozen rivers or enduring brutal beatings, drew attention, enhanced reputations and opened the way to influence. For women, especially, punishing the body was often the only route to power and legacy.

This pattern was not confined to women; men pursued similar paths. Nor is it a relic of the past. Even today, religious devotion expressed through extreme bodily endurance persists – in India, for example, ascetics hold an arm aloft until it withers. We may think ourselves too rational, too secular, to be drawn into such practices, but self-punishment in the name of belief remains very much alive.

The temptation is to label such figures simply as fanatics, yet the reality is more complex. Were they extremists, or merely individuals desperately trying to stand out and make a difference? Religion, identity, politics, economics – all can be forces for good but, in the wrong hands and when driven by personal ambition, they become extreme. What emerges, in Catherine's case and beyond, is the interplay between individual striving and wider social structures – why one person rises to prominence while others remain unheard.

In the end, you argue that reconnecting with these stories can help us resist division and manipulation. What do you think these women have to teach us about resilience and identity today?

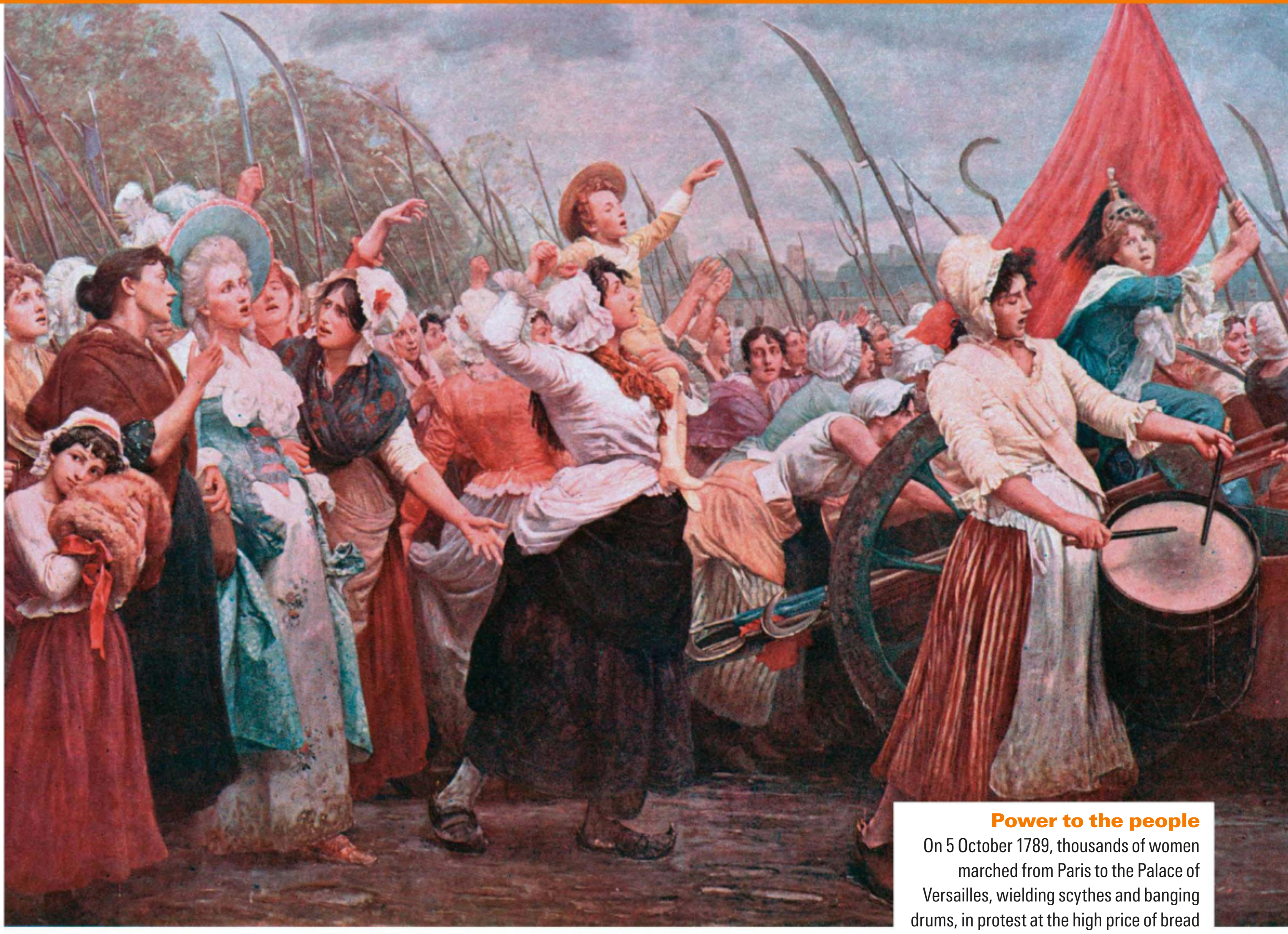
In my conclusion, I write that Agustina lit the cannon, while Joan picked up the sword. What unites these women is their courage. In times of threat and change, they were brave – and my argument is that we must be brave, too. We need clarity of mind and sharpened intellects to face today's challenges. We are not fighting on streets with swords, but against misinformation, propaganda and manipulation at the highest levels. We must be equipped to understand our place in the world and our communities.

The book begins and ends with women who had no concept of nations as we know them, yet shared the same land as us, walked the same paths and looked upon the same mountains. Their lives offer inspiration because they survived, thrived and achieved remarkable things in difficult circumstances. By connecting with their environments, we become part of their legacy.

I deeply believe in the power of local history and connecting with our surroundings – exploring archives, visiting museums, walking through graveyards. Engaging with objects and places allows us to connect with people of the past in a meaningful way. It reminds us that humans have always been complex and brilliant. We are not the pinnacle of progress, and the people of the past were not mere peasants living short, brutish lives. Their experiences are fascinating, and learning about them teaches us to be better citizens today.

In our modern world, we cannot control distant geopolitical events manipulated by the powerful. What we can control is our daily interactions with those around us, with the landscape and with our communities. Humanity has always found ways to coexist, collaborate and learn from one another across cultures and generations. That shared, everyday life that I see in my medieval figures still exists. We've just lost sight of it.

We need to reconnect with each other, with the land and with the tangible realities of life, rather than the digitised, ethereal existence of screens and texts. Humans have always lived alongside one another, and understanding those relationships is essential.



Power to the people
On 5 October 1789, thousands of women marched from Paris to the Palace of Versailles, wielding scythes and banging drums, in protest at the high price of bread

POLITICS

Royals, radicals and rebels

DAVID ANDRESS assesses a detailed portrait of the political and personal interactions that fuelled the French Revolution – but is only partly convinced by the book's approach

John Hardman
The French Revolution
A Political History

The French Revolution: A Political History
by John Hardman
Yale University Press,
384 pages, £25

Over a long career, John Hardman has specialised to great effect in teasing out, from speeches, decrees, minutes, memoranda, letters, diaries and unsent drafts, the varied moods of French political decision-makers before and after 1789. Translating the many tones of such documentation, from the augustly solemn to the petulantly self-pitying, he has shown readers the complex characters of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, alongside the unfolding riddles of the revolutionaries Barnave and Robespierre. In this new book, Hardman weaves this expertise into a portrait of the French Revolution as a whole, seen emphatically, and rarely in the current century, from the top down.

One of the intriguing points that emerges from this perspective is the highly personal nature of political interactions, right across this period. Hardman shows how natural it was in pre-revolutionary elite circles to expect a harvest of preferment for friends and relations to come from any shift of policy or ministerial position. As he demonstrates, those who came to prominence from 1789 also took such spoils for granted, whether seen as the reward for venal loyalty, or the rightful deserts of merit and virtue. The results looked very much the same. The misfortune of the revolutionaries was to combine such actions with a language of overbearing national unity, which could turn any suggestion of a following into a faction, barely short of overt treason.

Hardman leads us into the turbid flow of revolutionary events from 1787, when the king's minister Calonne first tried to make a so-called 'Assembly of Notables' accept far-reaching fiscal reform, with the threat of looming state bankruptcy if they didn't. A first note of caution is that Hardman makes almost no concession to anyone not familiar with the complexity of old-regime France, or

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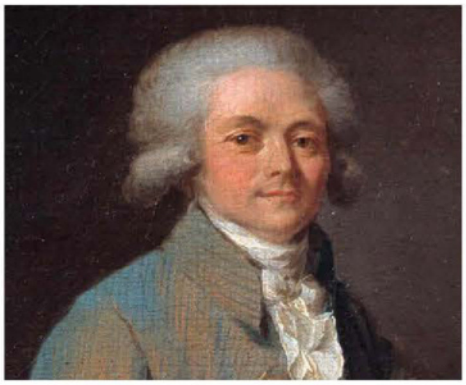
> “This is a portrait of the French Revolution seen emphatically, and rarely in the current century, from the top down”

the narrative of European and imperial wars that led to the burden of debt. Still less do we hear of other strands of prior history that might have a bearing, the multiple dimensions of a spreading ‘Enlightenment’, or the ways in which ‘public opinion’ had become a rhetoric of choice, even for government ministers.

Battle for power

The question for Hardman, from the outset, is: who rules? This gives a strong central thread to the first seven of the book’s 12 chapters, which take us from 1787 to the months in 1791–92 when Louis XVI began to exercise constitutional executive power, and then had it ripped from him. Hardman sets out with a grim drumbeat of detail the inexorable logic of deciding that the true sovereign was the nation, and in its name the plenary power of an absolute monarch could be squeezed down to little more than that of a chief minister, barred from political initiative, his subordinate ministers banned from membership of the legislature for fear of corruption.

Against this sits the king’s own descent into depression and recalcitrant opposition to such a diminution, until the humiliation of failed flight in June 1791 tied him to the throne, and left the royal couple reaching for war and foreign invasion as their last hope. Around these themes came constant machinations, with those who have gone down in history on radical and conservative sides sometimes thrown into remarkable, if short-lived, collaborations.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Maximilien Robespierre (1758–94) was one of the leading radical figures in the French Revolution

The problem with the chapters that follow on from these, taking the story through the Terror of 1793–94, to the arrival of another new constitution in mid-1795, is that once the conceit of monarchy is gone – that one man is indispensable to hold the state together – concentration on the centre of political life reveals little more than groups of men hacking at each other for reasons that never quite come into focus. At one level, this can be a faithful representation: the men who scapegoated Robespierre in July 1794 made great play of the political tempest that had lashed them down such a bloody road. But it leaves out almost everything that might explain that awful path.

The more general problem with Hardman’s approach is its clear indifference to anything happening outside the tight circles of French power-politics. This leads to some things that are merely odd – no historian of early America, for example, would credit the claim that the US constitution was born in an atmosphere of “calm confidence”. More broadly, just as there is no concession to chronological context for the narrative, there is none to the extraordinary reality of social upheaval that made the French Revolution such an epochal event.

The actions of crowds, and the common people more generally, are frequently written-off as those of the “mob”, “directed”or “designed” by a higher leadership; the remarkable Parisian insurrection of 12–14 July 1789 becomes, bafflingly, a “traditional riot” in its origins; and as an outdoor culture of popular activism develops, Hardman simply denounces it as confected agitation, even if “we do not know who” was the sinister elite force behind it.

In one sense, this approach replicates the assumptions of the contemporary elite, many of whom would end up convinced that the whole revolution was the fault of the Duc d’Orléans, the king’s cousin, and probably France’s richest man, whose outspoken support for liberalisation was taken to be a barely disguised bid for the throne. But modern historiography regards that claim as nonsensical, as a symptom of the limitations of such men’s worldview, and their inability to conceptualise the wider changes happening around them. Hardman’s choice to echo – and amplify – such lines of pseudo-reasoning should give the reader pause. He makes a fair case in the introduction for why he prioritises high politics over other dimensions of experience, but it is nonetheless questionable to ignore the insights of a century of social history.

David Andress is professor of modern history at the University of Portsmouth. His books include *The Terror* (Abacus, 2005)

ON THE PODCAST

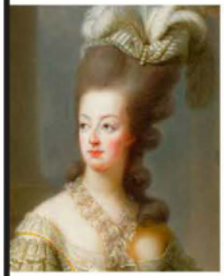
Revolutionary France

Content producer **Danny Bird** picks episodes of the HistoryExtra podcast about this tumultuous period in French history

Radical times

The decades preceding 1789 were filled with royal scandals, failed treaties, corruption and dazzling scientific spectacles. Through pamphlets, songs and underground news, Robert Darnton reveals in this December 2023 episode how ordinary Parisians absorbed these events.
historyextra.com/bastille-pod

Let them eat cake?



Behind the glittering façade of Versailles, Marie Antoinette’s own voice, preserved in private letters, reveal a woman of vulnerability, wit and resilience. Catriona Seth uncovers the individual behind the myth: teenage bride, embattled queen, tragic figure. This February 2023 episode reconsiders her legacy.
historyextra.com/antoinette-pod

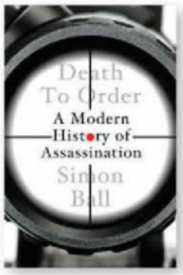
Guillotines and paranoia

Whispers of betrayal, sharpened blades and a nation gripped by fear are the order of the day in this episode from May 2024, as David Andress confronts the phase of the French Revolution known as ‘the Terror’.
He unpacks the symbolism of the guillotine as the revolution’s promise of liberty, equality and fraternity curdled.
historyextra.com/terror-pod

GLOBAL

The execution of policy

RICHARD J ALDRICH is impressed by an account of why intelligence services, often encouraged by politicians, target individuals, even outside times of war



Death to Order: A Modern History of Assassination
by Simon Ball
Yale University Press,
464 pages, £25

In the 21st century, we have moved into an era of performative covert action. Leaders such as Vladimir Putin have used the shadow of death to coerce their enemies overseas and to reinforce their warrior image at home. But as Simon Ball argues persuasively, assassination has always been an option, even for seemingly well-behaved states that appear to uphold the rule-based international order. In previous decades, they were simply a little less boastful about their activities.

This is a riveting and timely book, with its ambitious global coverage and assiduous historical research covering important assassinations since 1909. Ball offers us new insights on even the most famous cases including Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, Rasputin, Mahatma Gandhi, John F Kennedy and Martin Luther King. However, what is most intriguing is how 'civilised' states secretly regarded assassination as a necessary instrument of policy and deployed it regularly. In the 1950s, against the background of the Algerian War, the French secret service, the Directorate General for External Security, was busy killing arms dealers with silenced semi-automatic pistols in cities such as Hamburg and Geneva. Allied intelligence services simply looked the other way.

As late as 2005, even the nastiest leaders at least tried to cover their tracks. Many believe that President Bashar al-Assad of Syria ordered the killing of Lebanon's prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, although Syria has denied this. A massive car bomb threw his body and much of his entourage into the waters of the nearby Beirut harbour, from whence they were later recovered by Royal Navy divers. Hariri's offence was simply to be more popular than his country's competing pro-Syrian politicians. But after the event an absurd pre-planned cover-up then swung into operation, with diggers filling in the enormous crater and re-opening the street to traffic within hours. The two functionaries charged with Hariri's death after a lengthy UN investigation themselves died in mysterious circumstances.

This volume joins a flotilla of excellent but narrower books on the history of US covert killings. These include Markus Gunneflo's *Targeted Killing*, Christopher Fuller's *See it/Shoot it* and Luca Trenta's *The President's Kill List*. Together, they employ rich empirical detail and nuanced analysis to reveal how dealing out death came to be a secret part of the duties and prerogatives of the president after 1945. These authors converge in showing that US Cold War covert operations sought to kill at least six heads of state, albeit rather incompetently, emphasising that America has long nurtured an assassinations-based foreign policy. Eventually in 1976, fearful of public exposure, President Gerald Ford signed an executive order banning "political assassination". Reportedly, Henry Kissinger complained that this was "an act of insanity and national humiliation".

> **Assassination has always been an option, even for states that appear to uphold the rule-based international order**

This book begs some important questions, one being that if so many states have seen the need to resort to assassination, should it always be regarded as a malignant act? In the 1990s, MI6 clearly considered 'lethal' operations against some of the more genocidal figures in the former Yugoslavia, and in the 1970s, a British foreign secretary thought seriously about eliminating Idi Amin to halt his murderous rampage.

Assassination has not always been just a silver bullet to solve an awkward foreign policy crisis on the cheap, and *Death to Order* raises some profound ethical questions about consequentialism versus moral red lines. H

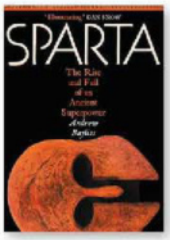
Richard J Aldrich is a professor of international security at the University of Warwick

GETTY IMAGES

Loss and anger Lebanese protesters hold up a picture of ex-prime minister Rafiq Hariri (right) and his son, Saad, during a 2006 gathering to mark the anniversary of Hariri's assassination

ANCIENT GREECE

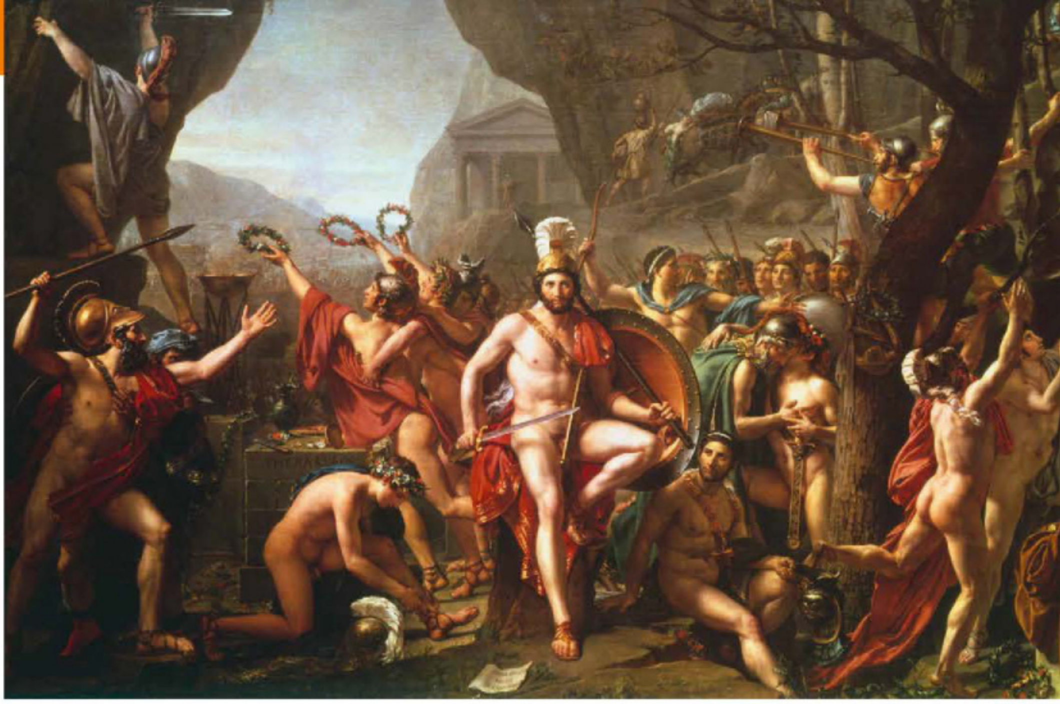
Beyond the mirage



Sparta: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Superpower
by Andrew Bayliss
Profile Books, 384 pages, £25

All serious scholarship on ancient Sparta has to be conducted within the penumbra of the 'mirage Spartiate', a French term coined in 1933 to describe the problem posed by idealised accounts of Sparta. Popularisers too often ignore it. Andrew Bayliss does not. Ancient Sparta's mirage was of two kinds: partly a sheer figment of the perfervid imaginations of Sparta-watchers; partly the distorted, even consciously bent, observations also of outsiders. In such a hazardous evidentiary situation, Bayliss does a grand job of sifting, evaluating and re-composing the available sources into a lively and plausible history of this nonpareil Greek city from c1000 to 371 BC.

As Bayliss notes, there's never a shortage of supposedly original new books on ancient Sparta. He's written one himself before this. There's something about Sparta that brings out the best or the worst in us historians, as indeed, arguably, their unique mode of upbringing and way of life brought out the best and the worst in the ancient Spartans.



Leonidas's last stand A 19th-century painting showing Leonidas, king of Sparta, at the battle of Thermopylae, where his Greek forces heroically held off the Persians for three days before being defeated

What could be more heroic than the 'last stand' of King Leonidas and his small Greek army at Thermopylae against a massive Persian onslaught in 480 BC? Admittedly, arguably even inevitably, it failed. Yet that the stand was made at all in what was more a cause – the freedom of all mainland Greeks from external domination – than merely a special military operation has ensured its living remembrance.

On the other, dark side, what could be more brutally inhumane than to keep in perpetual hereditary enslavement for centuries two whole populations, much more numerous than the Spartans, of their fellow Greeks? These were enslaved populations whom the Spartans not only exploited economically but also demeaned verbally (Helots meant 'captives') and in other cruel, including murderous, ways. And yet, paradoxically, the lot of the women of Sparta was superior to that of all other Greek females. This is the enigma wrapped in a mystery that Bayliss sets out to, if not definitively solve, at least render more amenable to objective historical understanding. A considerable feat.

Paul Cartledge, AG Leventis professor of Greek culture emeritus, University of Cambridge

CULTURAL

Passing interest

Graveyards: A History of Living with the Dead
by Roger Luckhurst
Thames & Hudson, 240 pages, £30

In his new book, Roger Luckhurst sets about the monumental task of chronicling the evolution of burial practices. In doing so, he does a wonderful job of exploring millennia of deathly debate, including the cultural meanings behind particular approaches.

The book is composed of three sections. Part One examines how humanity first took care of their dead, from prehistoric hominid grave sites to early examples of cremation and mummification. This is followed by a closer inspection of more structured tombs and necropolises, often associated with the advancement of human settlement. It includes a wealth of archaeological discoveries such as prehistoric barrow cemeteries, ancient Egyptian pyramids and vaults, as well as classical cities of the dead.

The second section focuses on the cultural beliefs of the world's great religions relating to death and burial, and features a timely examination of the rise of 'dark tourism', when people visit sites associated with death and tragedy. The final part investigates the issues surrounding a rapidly growing human population that faces a shrinking burial capacity. Discussed here are the archetypal death-dealing bodysnatchers, the varied burial rites of the world's elite, and the rise of the more familiar garden cemetery.

Despite the immense timeframe, throughout the book Luckhurst expertly communicates vast amounts of information clearly and succinctly, asking pertinent questions and exploring the answers through a wealth of historical and archaeological documentation. He also has a keen eye for the more eccentric practices.

In some sections, the level of detail provided may be over the top for a lay reader, but don't let that put you off. This is a delightful microcosm of death history, extremely accessible to all, beautifully illustrated throughout, and an excellent overview of the history of burial etiquette and associative graveyard attitudes and policies.

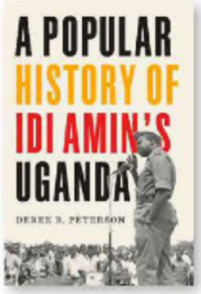
Lorraine Evans, research fellow, mortuary archaeologist and death historian specialising in non-conformist burial practice and funerary architecture

GETTY IMAGES

AFRICA

In service of a dictator

HARRIET ALDRICH admires a thoughtful exploration of why ordinary Ugandans helped keep a monstrous leader in power despite his regime's horrific violence



A Popular History of Idi Amin's Uganda
by Derek R Peterson
Yale University Press,
376 pages, £25

Idi Amin is a historical figure synonymous with evil. Branded 'Africa's Hitler' in newspaper headlines and immortalised in lurid books and documentaries detailing his regime's many atrocities, Uganda's most infamous dictator is remembered as a monster: irrational, bloodthirsty and larger than life.

While powerful, this framing has also been limiting. In both media and scholarship his rule has often been reduced to a spectacle of violence, obscuring the more complex social, cultural and political dynamics that allowed it to function for nearly a decade. Such narratives often foreclose deeper inquiries into how and why many Ugandans invested themselves in his government's projects, and their stories' unsettling lessons.

Derek Peterson's engaging new book is therefore an important intervention in the historiography of Uganda's postcolonial experience. Rather than reproducing well-worn caricatures, the author shifts the spotlight onto the low-level bureaucrats and personnel who made his government work. He considers clerks, teachers, curators, priests, radio engineers and artists who, while not directly involved in bloodshed, nonetheless sustained a deeply violent regime.

A Popular History of Idi Amin's Uganda orbits a central question: Why would 'commoners', as Peterson calls them, volunteer their labour to keep the wheels of dictatorship turning? His answer is that the regime was built less on brutal coercion than it was on its popular appeal, embodied in Amin's patriotic, anti-colonial rhetoric. The protagonists of this history were on the margins, far from the corridors of power in Kampala, yet Peterson argues that they nevertheless saw themselves as "frontline soldiers" in a global struggle for cultural decolonisation and economic liberation. Their self-documentation of their patriotic industriousness provides the archival richness that gives this work its depth.

Violent tyrant
Derek R Peterson's new book explores how ordinary Ugandans interacted with Idi Amin's dictatorship

> Idi Amin's regime was built less on brutal coercion than it was on its popular appeal

The book is the product of an extraordinary archival effort. Over 15 years, Peterson and his Ugandan colleagues have painstakingly preserved thousands of pages of sometimes waterlogged and wasp-covered provincial government records. From these documents, Peterson pulls a raft of remarkable stories which paint a vivid picture of the realities and personalities of the often-peculiar people he portrays. While occasionally over-detailed, Peterson consistently connects individual experiences to larger questions, exploring themes such as the development of cultural technologies, with a particular focus on the role of radio, archives and museums in sustaining Amin's dictatorship.

Peterson is faced with a difficult balancing act. His reframing of Amin's regime as one of Pan-Africanist and anti-colonial populism, alongside his emphasis on patriotic bureaucrats invested in the often-prosaic machinery of government, risks downplaying the horrific violence intrinsic to the regime. Nonetheless, Peterson walks this line successfully for the most part. This is a highly empathetic work which dives deeply into individual lives and motivations with nuance, without shying away from the often misogynist and fascist ideologies that underpinned their actions.

This reframing is a welcome challenge to scholarship that treats Amin as a grotesque aberration, instead forcing us to confront uncomfortable truths about the ways in which ordinary people contribute to the endurance of authoritarian governments. Peterson draws important parallels with the populist authoritarianism resurgent globally, which only serves to underscore the immense relevance and stakes of this history.

Harriet Aldrich is a lecturer in security and intelligence studies at the University of Buckingham

GETTY IMAGES

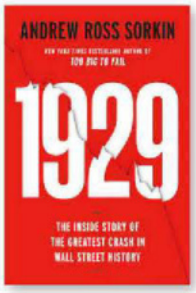
$100 WILL
BUY THIS CAR
MUST HAVE CASH
LOST ALL ON THE
STOCK MARKET

Fire sale A man who lost all his money on the US stock market as a consequence of Black Thursday in October 1929 advertises his car for cash

FINANCE

A global crash

PATRICIA CLAVIN enjoys a fast-paced account of the brutal collapse of the American stock market in 1929, but misses the wider global context


ANDREW ROSS SORKIN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF TOO BIG TO FAIL
1929
THE INSIDE STORY OF THE GREATEST CRASH IN WALL STREET HISTORY

1929: The Inside Story of the Greatest Crash in Wall Street History
by Andrew Ross Sorkin
Allen Lane, 592 pages, £30

Andrew Ross Sorkin's stylish retelling of the history of the Wall Street crash takes us into the minds of the leading protagonists and the machinery of financial markets. He is the author of *Too Big to Fail*, a bestselling account of the 2008 financial crisis made into a film of the same name, and has now turned to its historical forerunner: the collapse of the American stock market that began on 'Black Thursday', 24 October 1929.

Part One of the book narrates the conversations, meetings and journeys of major investors, bankers and politicians between February and October 1929. We have an insider's view onto their fabulously wealthy lifestyles. We learn what motivated and ailed them. And we discover why some began to fear the bubble would burst, and their forlorn efforts to forestall it. The narrative is fast-paced, with individual chapters covering single days or weeks. Part Two covers the years from 1930 to 1933, with chapters exploring the election of President Roosevelt and the pioneering Glass-Steagall legislation to regulate the American banking system.

This is a history with many villains and few heroes. We learn about the credit-generating tools and new communication technologies that encourage speculation to grow. A central protagonist and speculative innovator is 'Sunshine Charlie', Charles Edwin Mitchell, the chairman and president of the National City Bank (today's Citibank) whose activities helped fuel the bubble. Sorkin's interest is in the formation and behaviour of an American elite, reminding his readers of the important lessons regarding domestic market regulation.

Other leading Americans, notably US president Herbert Hoover, are indicted by Sorkin, as they were in the court of US public opinion at the time, because they failed to do anything to combat the collapse of confidence or the wider effects of the crash. It's where the book would have benefited from a stronger engagement with the broader context and implications of US policies. What looked like inaction was, in fact, the product of Hoover and the Federal Reserve's commitment to orthodox economic policy and their decision to recreate the international gold standard after the First World War. Together with US bank JP Morgan, after 1918 the US administration and the Fed helped stabilise and reglobalise the world economy. Their assistance was invaluable to European economies torn apart by war. Some of their measures were successful, but they contained seeds of the next financial crisis.

The book's close focus on an elite and Wall Street means we get no sense of how the crisis was experienced by ordinary Americans as they were driven into destitution. Rural life is almost completely absent, despite the fact most of the banks that collapsed were small ones on which farming communities depended. It is also hard to understand how events in the US in 1929 connected to what was happening in the global economy, why they served as the gateway to a world-wide Great Depression and intensified geopolitical rivalries that led to the Second World War. H

Patricia Clavin is professor of modern history at the University of Oxford

GETTY IMAGES

ENCOUNTERS

DIARY By **Jonathan Wright** and **Danny Bird**
HISTORY COOKBOOK **Elizabethan pear conserve**
EXPLORE **Georgian Theatre Royal, Richmond**

FILM

Battle of wits

When *Nuremberg* received its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September, it received a four-minute standing ovation. So director and screenwriter James Vanderbilt's study of evil – which, reviews suggest, serves in part as a warning that fascism could 'happen here' – should be worth catching on the big screen ahead of its release on Sky Cinema in January 2026.

Based on Jack El-Hai's 2013 book *The Nazi and the Psychiatrist*, the film focuses on Douglas Kelley (Rami Malek), the American psychiatrist who was charged with deciding whether leading Nazis were competent to stand trial. Central to the film is the sparring between Kelley and Hermann Göring, played with real menace by Russell Crowe.

Nuremberg
In cinemas from Friday 14 November

Russell Crowe plays Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring in a new film exploring the intertwined stories of the powerful Nazi leader and the psychiatrist assigned to assess him before the Nuremberg trials

SONY PICTURE CLASSICS

What's on this week?
Visit *historyextra.com* for updates on upcoming history TV and radio programmes

EXHIBITIONS

Alfred Buckham: Daredevil Photographer

National Galleries of Scotland: Portrait, Edinburgh / Until 19 April 2026 / *nationalgalleries.org*

Admire more than 100 images and artefacts spanning the career of a groundbreaking pioneer of aerial photography, from wartime shots to breathtaking views of Scotland. Discover letters, journals and even Buckham's passport, displayed for the first time, and explore his process via original cameras and glass negatives. You can even dabble in his photographic techniques in an interactive zone.

A Grand Chorus: The Power of Music

Foundling Museum, London / Until 29 March 2026 / *foundlingmuseum.org.uk*

Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* – first performed in 1749 to raise funds for the Foundling Hospital – is explored in this new exhibition that traces its journey from 18th-century composition to modern impact. Across four floors, rare scores, instruments, art and testimonies reveal music's power to transform lives. Highlights include personal stories of former Foundlings and Mikhail Karikis's UK debut installation *We Are Together Because…* (pictured), a contemporary anthem echoing Handel's masterpiece.

Lee Miller

Tate Britain, London / Until 15 February 2026 / *tate.org.uk*

This retrospective captures the astonishing life and work of one of photography's boldest visionaries, from surrealist experiments with Man Ray to war reportage that redefined photojournalism. With more than 230 prints, unseen archival treasures and film extracts, this exhibition unveils Miller's huge creativity through shots of Parisian streets, the Egyptian desert, Blitz-ravaged London (below) and the frontlines of war.

In a new drama, Tom Cullen and Lola Petticrew play lovers from either side of the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland

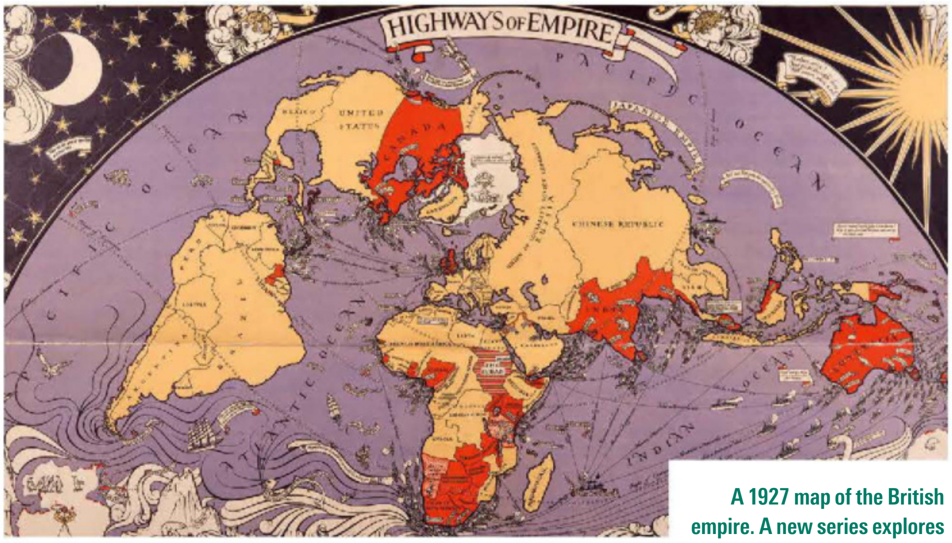
TV

A love divided

Set in 1975, at the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Louise Kennedy's debut novel *Trespasses* (2022) tells the story of a forbidden love affair. Adapted for the screen by Ailbhe Keogan, it centres on a Catholic schoolteacher, Cushla (Lola Petticrew), who falls for an older married Protestant barrister, Michael (Tom Cullen).

Inevitably, in light of the sectarian divide, difficulties ensue, but this nevertheless promises to be a nuanced evocation of time and place. Michael, for instance, is an unconventional man who defends IRA suspects. A strong supporting cast includes Gillian Anderson as Cushla's mother Gina, who constantly provokes and spars with her daughter.

Trespasses
Channel 4 / November



A 1927 map of the British empire. A new series explores how the empire shaped – and still shapes – millions of lives

TV

Colonial legacy

At the height of its imperial power, Britain ruled over a realm that encompassed a fifth of the world's land surface and almost a quarter of its people. One legacy of this history is that the forebears of billions of people were subjects of the British empire.

In the 21st century, argues David Olusoga, we need to understand what happened – precisely because the empire era shaped, and still shapes, so many lives. This means navigating contested, complex and sometimes contradictory narratives. His landmark new series begins in the first Elizabethan era, when England was a relatively poor nation compared with its European rivals, Spain and Portugal. How did this begin to change, and how do piracy and slavery play into this story?

Empire with David Olusoga
BBC Two / November

TATE BRITAIN/FOUNDLING MUSEUM/GETTY IMAGES/CHANNEL 4

Michael Shannon plays ill-fated president James A Garfield in a new series dramatising the background to his murder

NETFLIX/GETTY IMAGES/BBC

TV

Political assassination

Famously, James Abram Garfield didn't set out to lead the US. Having been born into abject poverty, the man who became the country's 20th president was elected by the American public after being chosen as a compromise candidate at the 1880 Republican National Convention – a fractious event at which 36 ballots were needed before the decision was made.

Shortly after Garfield's election, a deluded lawyer with mental health problems, Charles Guiteau, became convinced that he had been central to Garfield's electoral success and deserved a consulship as reward. A shocking act of political violence followed – a story revisited in a new drama series starring Michael Shannon as Garfield and Matthew Macfadyen as Guiteau.

Death by Lightning

Netflix / Streaming from Thursday 6 November

Born the twelfth of 13 children in a south Wales mining town, Richard Burton became one of the world's most famous actors

TV

Screen icon

Born Richard Jenkins in Pontrhydyfen, south Wales in November 1925, Richard Burton made his first forays into professional theatre during the Second World War. Having come from a large but poor family, he became arguably the greatest movie star of his generation, famed both for his extraordinary performances and a personal life that often verged on the chaotic, notably during his famously volatile relationship with Elizabeth Taylor.

The actor's story is charted in *Richard Burton – Wild Genius*, a documentary that features interviews with his widow, Sally, and his daughter Kate. Look out, too, for a screening of the acclaimed biopic-drama **Mr Burton** (BBC One).

Richard Burton – Wild Genius

BBC One Wales and BBC Two / November

RADIO HIGHLIGHTS

Shared space

The International Space Station (ISS) orbits 250 miles above us. A collaboration between 15 countries, it weighs around 400 tonnes and is the size of a football pitch. Since 2 November 2000, it has ensured that humankind has an off-planet presence. It's also the subject of **Archive on 4: Out of This World** (BBC Radio 4, Saturday 1 November), which tells the story of how the ISS came to be built. It's a tale of international cooperation, but also of rivalry and political machinations. Via archive audio, eyewitness testimony and the insights of experts, the documentary takes in the end of the Cold War, China's exclusion and, intriguingly, a prefab in Moscow. It also asks: what can the ISS tell us about a future in which nations work together in space?

Archive on 4: Jodrell Bank at 80 (BBC Radio 4, Saturday 8 November) charts the history of the UK's largest radio telescope. Presented by composer, space fan and BBC Radio 3 presenter Hannah Peel, the documentary follows her research into both how Jodrell came to be built in Cheshire and its place in the nation's cultural landscape. Physicist and radio astronomer Sir Bernard Lovell, the space race, GCHQ snooping and Tom Baker-era *Dr Who* all feature. The documentary also eavesdrops on Peel writing a new composition in Jodrell's honour, a piece recorded by the BBC Philharmonic in Salford.

Jodrell Bank's Lovell Telescope, which was completed in 1957

Among forthcoming highlights in the *Witness History* strand, **The Spanish King Reclaims His Throne** (BBC Radio 4, Sunday 16 November) looks particularly intriguing. It reveals how Prince Juan Carlos confounded the expectations of General Franco, who thought the king he chose would maintain his authoritarian regime (see our feature on page 28 for more on this history). Also listen out for **The Howard Hughes Literary Hoax** (BBC World Service, Wednesday 26 November), recalling when a publisher paid $750,000 for a faked autobiography.

Finally, in **History's Toughest Heroes** (BBC Radio 4, continuing on Tuesday 4 November), Ray Winstone recounts stories of people who lived on the edge.

Ralph Fiennes plays a demanding new choirmaster in a Yorkshire village, against the backdrop of the First World War, in a film written by Alan Bennett

FILM

Hymn to life

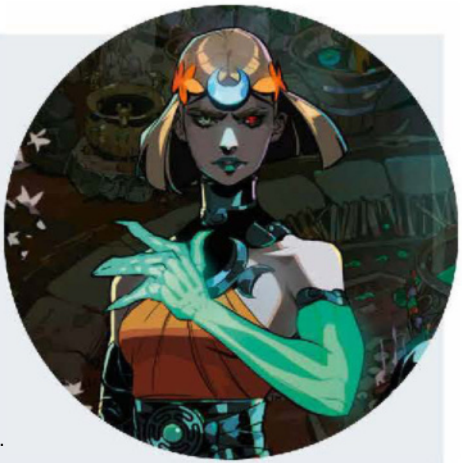
Scripted by Alan Bennett and directed by Nicholas Hytner – a collaboration that produced *The Madness of King George* and *The History Boys* – *The Choral* is set in 1916. As conflict rages on the western front, the choral society in Ramsden, Yorkshire needs to recruit new members – and a musician to lead the singers.

Enter the uncompromising figure of Dr Henry Guthrie (Ralph Fiennes), a man whom the locals suspect has something to hide, and also someone who spent much of his prewar career in Germany. What follows is a study of resilience, played out against a backdrop of conscription papers arriving in the mail, and a sense that loss and grief lie ahead. A cast of familiar faces includes Roger Allam, Mark Addy and Alun Armstrong. H

The Choral
In cinemas from Friday 7 November

GAMES / Myth world

JAMES OSBORNE joins a quest inspired by ancient Greek legends, traversing richly reimagined lands and meeting gods and spirits



Hades II
Supergiant / £24.99

The stories we know today from ancient Greek myth are woven together from many disparate sources. *Hades II*, the sequel to the award-winning role-playing game from 2020, pulls those fragments together to build something altogether new – and the result is suitably spellbinding.

The first game followed Zagreus, son of Hades. The sequel's protagonist is Melinoë, a figure mentioned only briefly in surviving sources, sometimes described as a daughter of Persephone. Here, she takes centre stage as a sorceress who confronts Chronos, the Titan of time.

In classical myth, Chronos rose to power by overthrowing his father, Uranus, only to devour his own children when warned that they would one day depose him. *Hades II* imagines Chronos's escape from Tartarus, the deepest region of the underworld; his abduction of Hades; and Melinoë's many attempts to defeat him.

As Melinoë, you choose whether to descend into Tartarus or climb towards besieged Olympus. Each route has its own sequence of regions and bosses, ensuring variety across repeated runs, while the steady accumulation of abilities guarantees progress even in defeat. Each failed attempt offers a reset and new conversations with gods and spirits, gradually revealing the scale of Chronos's threat.

One of the game's greatest strengths lies in how it reinterprets familiar stories and expands on marginal ones. Some characters are drawn from myth but reimagined as layered personalities: we meet Hecate, goddess of magic and crossroads; Nemesis, spirit of retribution; and Arachne, the cursed weaver.

Hades II highlights vividly the richness and continuing resonance of those ancient Greek legends. H

Roam the depths of the ancient Greek underworld as Melinoë (above right), a powerful sorceress charged with defeating Chronos, the Titan of time

James Osborne is digital content producer for HistoryExtra

SONY PICTURE CLASSICS/SUPERGIANT

TUDOR LIFE
with Ruth Goodman

Episode one | Leisure

Episode two | Religion

Episode three | Work

Episode four | Childhood

Episode five | Food and drink

Episode six | Fashion

Episode seven | Love, sex and marriage

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HISTORY EXTRA ACADEMY

Explore our new HistoryExtra Academy series, free to watch if you are a *BBC History Magazine* subscriber

This seven-episode course, filmed on location in Plas Mawr, Conwy, explores what life was like for ordinary Tudor people – from the clothes they wore, to the food they ate – guided by historian Ruth Goodman.

About the expert

Ruth Goodman is a historian of the social and domestic life of Britain. She has advised the Royal Shakespeare Company's Globe Theatre and presented a number of BBC television series, including *Tudor Monastery Farm*. She is also the author of several books, including *How to Be a Tudor: A Dawn-to-Dusk Guide to Everyday Life* (Viking, 2015).

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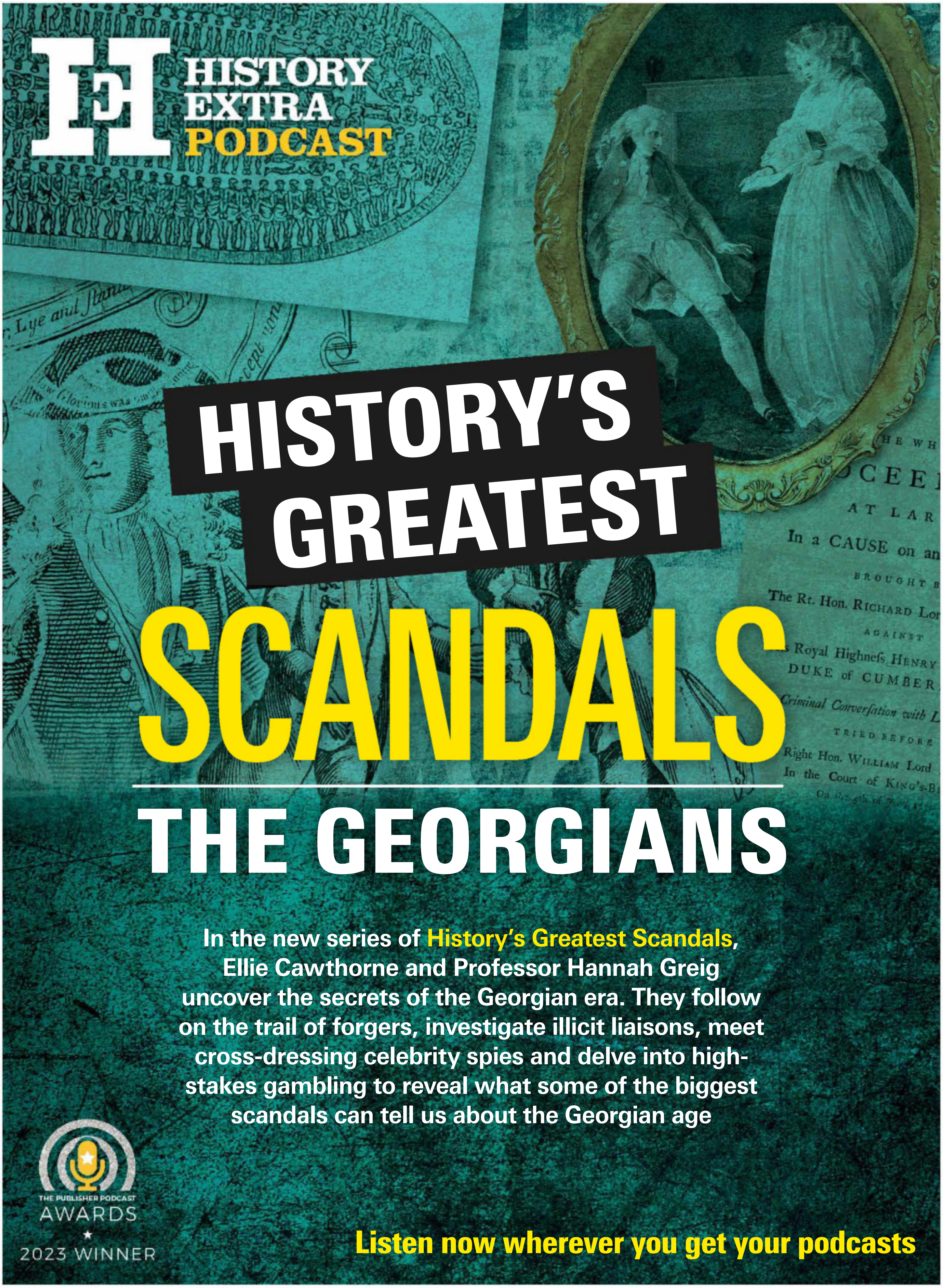

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Royal Highneſs HENRY
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TRIED BEFORE
Right Hon. WILLIAM Lord
In the Court of KING's-B

HISTORY
EXTRA
PODCAST

HISTORY'S GREATEST SCANDALS

THE GEORGIANS

In the new series of History's Greatest Scandals, Ellie Cawthorne and Professor Hannah Greig uncover the secrets of the Georgian era. They follow on the trail of forgers, investigate illicit liaisons, meet cross-dressing celebrity spies and delve into high-stakes gambling to reveal what some of the biggest scandals can tell us about the Georgian age

THE PUBLISHER PODCAST
AWARDS
★
2023 WINNER

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Richly coloured, sweet and unctuous, pears cooked in wine might be eaten whole or heated further to create a delicious, long-lasting fruity paste

RECIPE

Elizabethan pear conserve

ELEANOR BARNETT cooks up a colourful, sweet fruit dessert cherished by Tudor folk during the cold days of winter

Pears included in Elizabethan recipes are typically 'wardens' – hardy varieties that must be cooked before eating, their flesh blushing with a red hue and softening into buttery deliciousness. Tudor doctors recommended that wardens cooked with sugar, spices and wine be eaten at the end of a meal. Warden pies, such as those mentioned in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* – "I must have saffron to colour the warden pies," japes the clown – were commonly eaten as a festive treat.

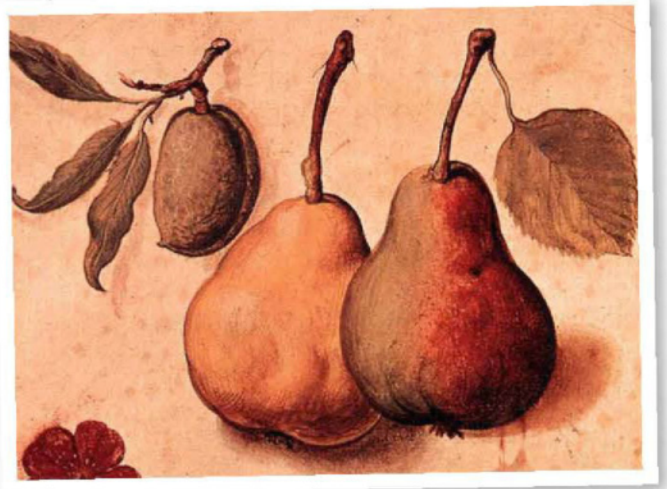
Some have deduced from the name that warden pears must have been introduced to Britain by the Cistercian monks of Warden Abbey in Bedfordshire, but it is more likely that they were imported centuries earlier by the Romans. The name instead likely comes from the Anglo-Norman word *warder*, meaning 'to keep'. That's because wardens, which are harvested in the late autumn, lasted well over the winter months – an important quality in an age before artificial refrigeration. As I explore in my book *Leftovers*, during the Elizabethan era, everyone – irrespective of wealth – was in some way involved in the ritual preservation of food.

Wardens could be stored in sand or wool scraps, kept in boiled wine, or made into preserves. Wealthy Tudor housewives, such as Lady Elinor Fettiplace of Appleton Manor near Oxford, filled many autumn afternoons gathering and preserving the colourful fruit harvests from their orchards and gardens. In her book of recipes from 1604, Lady Fettiplace describes marmalades made at the start of autumn from quince (the name 'marmalade' comes, in fact, from the Portuguese word for quince, *marmelo*), alongside plum, apple, gooseberry, cherry and pear preserves.

For this month's recipe, I've recreated a beautifully sweet and flavourful warden conserve. Ideally use a warden variety of pear such as Black Worcester, which will cook better (and is closer to those eaten in Elizabethan times), though varieties more commonly available from supermarkets – such as Conference – will work, too, especially if still not quite ripe when you cook them.

You can serve the cooked pears whole in the syrup or incorporate them into the syrup and cook further, past the setting point. In Tudor times, the resultant sticky, long-lasting fruit paste was kept in wooden boxes, and was often given as a New Year's gift to friends and family. Either way, such treats would be most welcome on a winter banqueting table. ◼

ALAMY/ELEANOR BARNETT



Pears depicted in a 16th-century book illustration. Firm warden varieties are ideal for conserving

Serves: 3 (if you leave the pears whole), or 10 (as a conserve)
Difficulty: 3/10
Time taken: 1–1.5hrs

INGREDIENTS

3 pears, ideally a warden variety or otherwise under-ripe
500ml sweet red wine, such as Mavrodaphni
170ml clear runny honey
110g sugar
1 tsp each cinnamon and ginger

METHOD

1. Make a syrup by heating 300ml of wine with honey and sugar in a pan until all of the sugar is dissolved. Set aside.
2. Peel the pears but keep them whole.
3. Cook the pears in the remaining 200ml red wine (add more to cover them, if necessary) until they are soft and almost all of the wine has been absorbed, typically taking about 20–30 minutes.
4. If eating whole, simply plate each cooked pear, pour over the syrup to cover, add the spices and serve.
5. Alternatively, mash the pears using a sieve or blender .
6. Mix this mashed fruit with the syrup and add the spices.
7. Cook on a low heat for at least half an hour or until most of the liquid has evaporated. The resulting conserve can be served once cooled or stored in jars.

Eleanor Barnett is a food historian at Cardiff University. She is the author of *Leftovers: A History of Food Waste and Preservation* (Apollo, 2024), and posts @Historyeats on Instagram

EXPLORE... GEORGIAN THEATRE ROYAL, RICHMOND

A stage of life

In the late 18th century, dramatic performances were long, raucous and stinky, yet hugely popular. **PAUL BLOOMFIELD** goes backstage in North Yorkshire at Britain's oldest working theatre in its original form

The smell of the greasepaint, the roar of the crowd, the flare of the floodlights – what enchantments they conjure! If you'd visited a regional playhouse over two centuries ago, though, a very different set of sights, sounds and, particularly, scents would have assailed you.

"Light was from tallow candles made with mutton fat – smelly and smoky," explains tour guide Dave Palmer in Richmond's Georgian Theatre Royal. Not that the audience would have cared. "They were pretty pungent, too," smiles Palmer. "They didn't bathe much, and puffed away on clay pipes throughout the five or six-hour show. With about 400 people packed into pit, stalls and boxes, the whole place ponged to high heaven. And it was a wild crowd: yelling, booing, cheering, hissing, throwing things at the actors – flowers if they liked them, rotten apples if they didn't."

That was a transformative era for theatre. Regional players had been stymied by the Licensing Act of 1737; then came the Theatrical Representations Act in 1788. "It opened up opportunities for provincial troupes," says Palmer, "with two key restrictions: a licence was issued for 60 days, and you couldn't reapply in that town for nine months." As a result, companies toured wide regions, appearing for a few weeks in each town.

One of the most successful troupes was run by actor-manager Samuel Butler who – taking advantage of the new act – built Richmond's theatre in 1788. Today, the dinky house looks much as it did in its heyday, down to the pale green decor and boxes (three shillings) named for playwrights: Goldsmith, Sheridan, Dryden, Congreve and, of course, Shakespeare. Smellier cheap seats cost a shilling – perhaps a quarter of a low-ranking servant's weekly wage. Butler's company toured eight venues across northern England, from Ulverston on the west coast to Whitby on the east. "Life as a travelling player was tough," Palmer reflects. "They walked long distances, carrying sets and costumes, learning new plays and rehearsing as they went."

Butler, it seems, was a good manager: he paid his cast of 10 or 12 men and women well and on time – 15 shillings a week. His company, managed by his second wife after his death in 1812, flourished until the 1820s when, like other provincial theatres, it started to struggle. Economic recession and changing fashion were partly to blame, but the main reason was the industrial revolution. Roads improved, and canals and railways arrived. "If you could afford it, you could now travel quickly to a place with a big permanent theatre, like York or Newcastle," says Palmer.

Richmond's theatre is a miraculous survivor. "From the proscenium arch through the stalls and boxes, the structure is largely as it was in 1788," beams Dave. One of the highlights stands in the backstage exhibition area: a spectacular woodland scene. Painted sometime between 1818 and 1836, it's believed to be the oldest surviving stage set in the UK.

After 1830, regular performances ceased. The building was divided into two, and let by various tradespeople, the theatre long forgotten. Then a postwar survey found more than 90 per cent of the original structure intact. A nonprofit trust was incorporated, a public appeal launched and, following restoration, the theatre reopened in 1963.

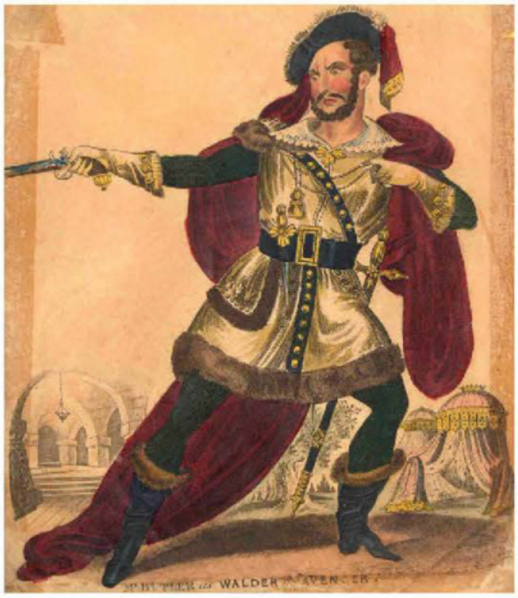
Today, the playhouse again stages plays, as well as offering the Georgian Theatre Experience tour. However you visit, you'll enjoy immersive insights into past entertainments – with more than a whiff of history. H

> **"With about 400 people packed into pit, stalls and boxes, the whole place ponged to high heaven"**

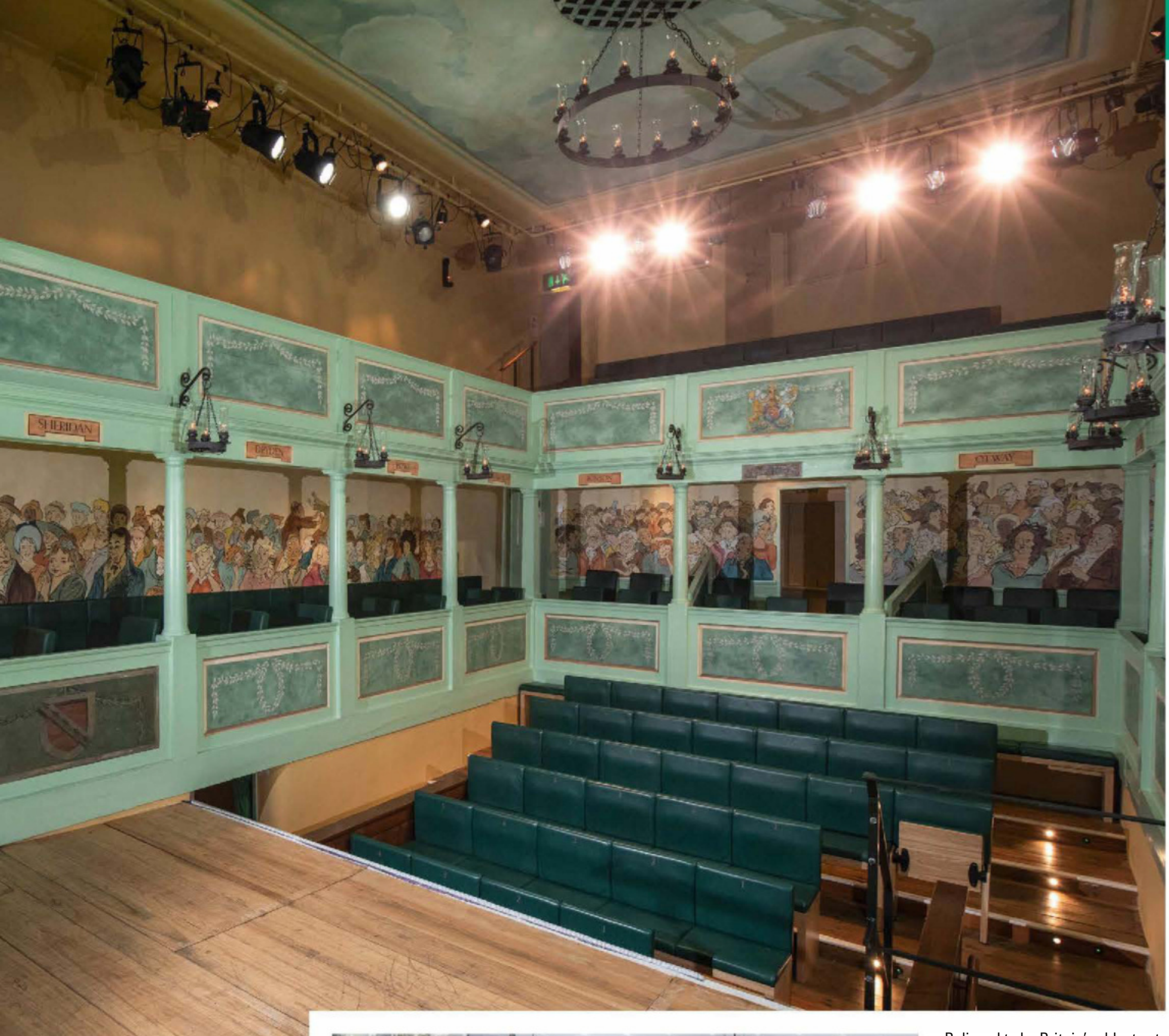
Paul Bloomfield is a writer and host of the HistoryExtra podcast series History's Greatest Cities: *historyextra.com/greatest-cities*

For more information, head to **georgiantheatreroyal.co.uk**

The intimate 18th-century auditorium of the Georgian Theatre Royal has a capacity of 154 today, with the furthest seat from the stage only 10.7 metres away



Samuel Butler was the actor-manager who built Richmond's theatre in 1788. He managed the playhouse alongside others in northern England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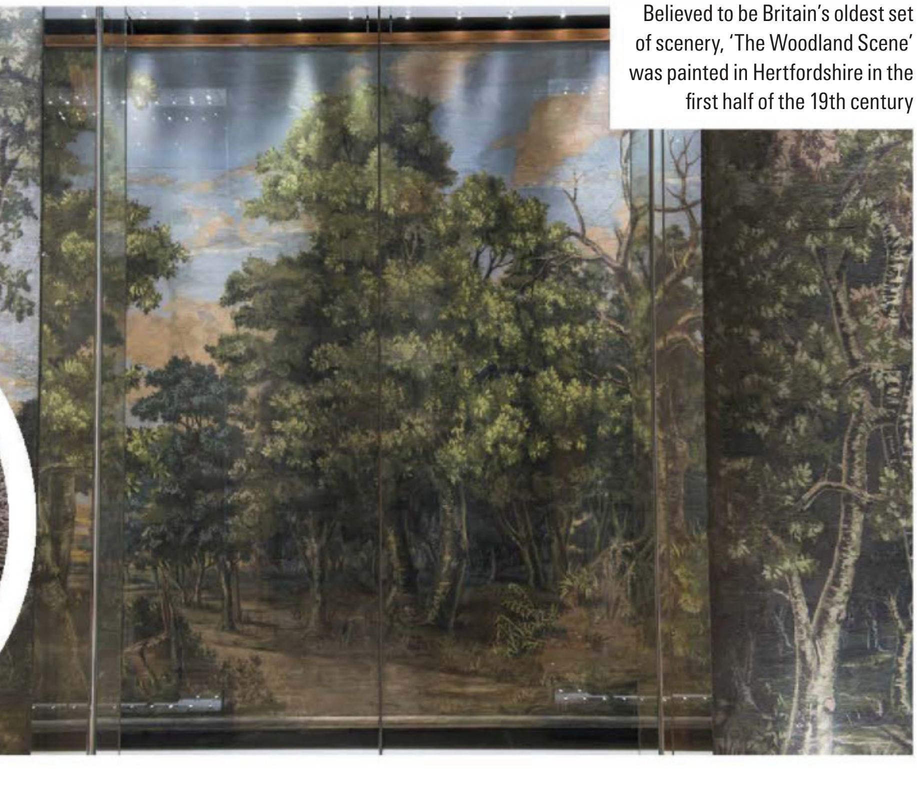


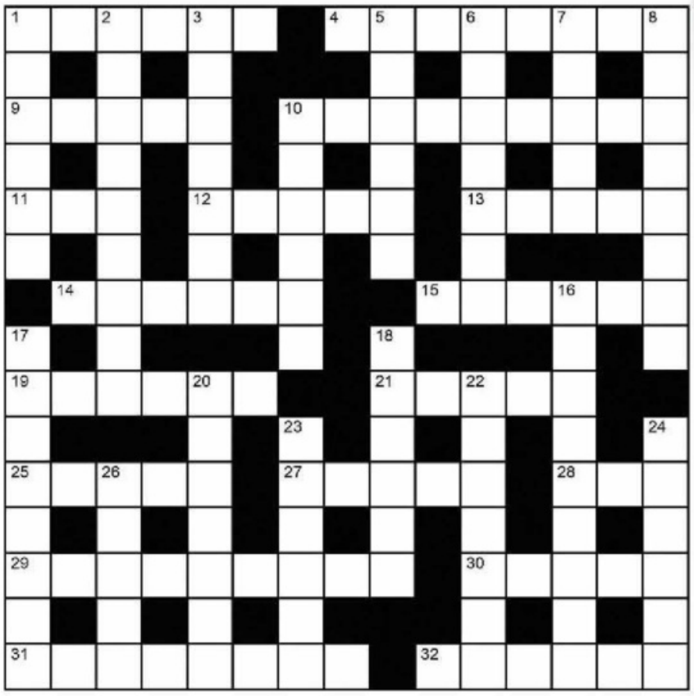
Believed to be Britain's oldest set of scenery, 'The Woodland Scene' was painted in Hertfordshire in the first half of the 19th century

Richmond's Georgian Theatre Royal reopened in 1963 and was restored for a second time in 2002–03, at a cost of £1.6m. An extension with bars and foyers was added

THE GEORGIAN THEATRE ROYAL

GEORGIAN THEATRE ROYAL RICHMOND

PRIZE CROSSWORD



Across

1/4 Site of an 1854 rebellion by gold diggers in Victoria, Australia who, though defeated, secured the vote and better treatment (6,8)

9 Romulus and Remus? (5)

10 The eleventh month of the French Revolutionary calendar (9)

11/12/28 Term sometimes applied to the conflict precipitated by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 (3,5,3)

13 First coins (with the half version) struck by the US mint in 1793 (5)

14 Scene of a crushing defeat of the Romans by Hannibal (6)

15 Early Latin name for England (6)

19 A physical test once used to determine an accused's innocence or guilt (6)

21 Historic port of Aberdeenshire, once a trade centre of weaving and silversmithing (5)

25 The best-known work of this 17th/18th-century satirist has become a classic of children's literature (5)

27 An Act of 1914 with the acronym DORA made provisions for its defence (5)

28 See 11 across

29 The 21 members of the committee formed in 1310 to limit Edward II's power (9)

30 Opera ____, an Italian comic style that emerged as a separate genre in the early 18th century (5)

31 Trade union leader whose call for picketing of a South Yorkshire coking plant in June 1984 led to the controversial 'battle of Orgreave' (8)

32 One spelling of the surname of the English adventurer and one-time royal favourite of Elizabeth I, executed on the orders of James VI & I (6)

Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* is a well-known example of what style of comic opera? *(30 across)*

Down

1 Landed property (6)

2 Area of Germany re-militarised by Hitler in 1936 in violation of the Treaty of Versailles (9)

3 Soviet premier following Khrushchev's ousting, whose radical policies were kept in check by colleagues (7)

5 That of Paris in 1783 ended the American War of Independence (6)

6 Economic organisation established in 1949 by the Soviet Union and a number of other eastern bloc countries (7)

7 Irish monk, later a saint, who established a monastery on Lindisfarne (5)

8 Pre-Roman Italian civilisation (8)

10 City of Boeotia, Greece, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cites in the world (6)

16 Force created in 1935 under the command of Hermann Göring (9)

17 Town in Picardy captured in 486 by Clovis I, king of the Franks (8)

18 Merchant vessels with concealed guns, used in the world wars to lure submarines to the surface (1-5)

20 Icelandic parliament, founded more than 1,000 years ago (7)

22 Country of south-west Africa that gained independence from South Africa in 1990 following fraught negotiations (7)

23 The 20th-century British novelist, essayist and critic who gave the world the term 'Big Brother' (6)

24 Northern Irish city, a medieval ecclesiastical capital (6)

26 Hindu god of thunder, lightning etc. (5)

Compiled by **Eddie James**

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Solution to our October 2025 crossword

Across 1 Escrow 4 Long Kesh 10 Scapa Flow 11 Niger 12 Glencoe 14 Suharto 15 Kurd 16 Crusader 20 Albright 21/26 Khmer Rouge 23 Cutlass 25 Hundred 28 Lloyd 29 Salisbury 31 Test Acts 32 Wyvern
Down 1 Ensign 2 Clare 3 Oda 5 Oswestry 6 Genghis Khan 7 Edgar 8 Harcourt 9 Olmec 13 Cartimandua 15 KGB 17 Dee 18 Lancelot 19 Chess set 22 Thule 24 Tools 27 Dayan 30 Spy

Four winners of *The Big Hop*:
Vesta Poulston, Congleton; Patrick Cannings, Hereford; Peter Crane, Hastings; Karen Houghton, Isle of Man

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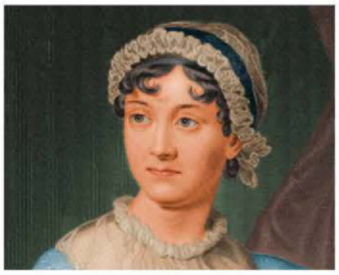
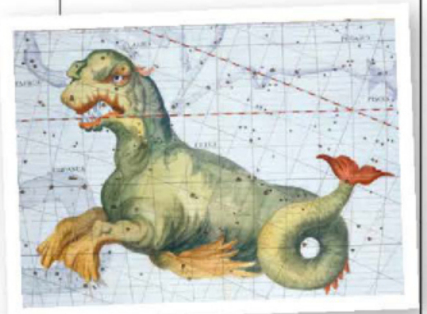


Jane Austen's Regency bias

Lizzie Rogers considers how the writer's work both illuminates and confuses our understanding of her era



Monsters of the deep

Prema Arasu reveals the historical origins of five terrifying sea creatures

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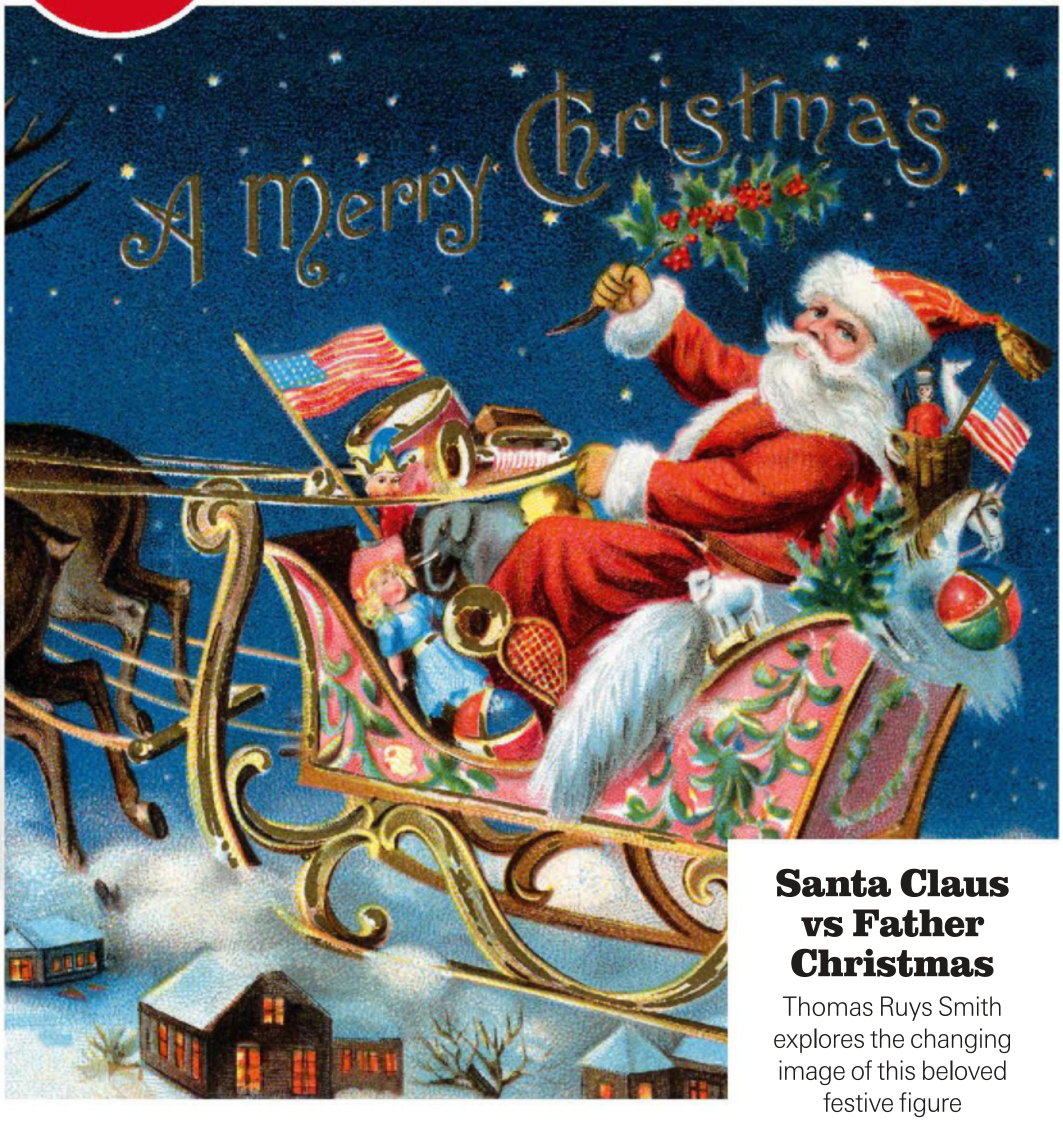
A Merry Christmas

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MY HISTORY HERO

Economist ***Rain Newton-Smith*** *chooses*

Helen Keller

1880–1968

Helen Keller uses her fingers to read a young girl's lips in 1907. "She helped transform perceptions of what it was to be deaf and blind," says Rain Newton-Smith

IN PROFILE

Helen Keller was an American writer and activist. Having lost her sight and hearing at just 19 months old, she later learned how to speak, read and write. She became a prolific author and campaigner for blind and deaf people, women's suffrage and world peace. In 1964, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Lyndon Johnson. Her ashes were interred at Washington National Cathedral with long-time companions Anne Sullivan and Polly Thomson.

> " She sought to use the power of language to change the world, becoming an advocate for women's suffrage and disability rights "

Rain Newton-Smith has been the chief executive of the Confederation of British Industry since 2023, and was its chief economist 2014–23. *cbi.org.uk*

When did you first hear about Keller? It was when I was eight or nine years old, growing up in Canada, and I borrowed a book about her from my local library. I was fascinated to learn how a teacher, Anne Sullivan, was able to connect with this deaf and blind child, and to teach her the basics of language – spelling out words such as 'water' on her hands – which unlocked a whole new world for her. I was also struck by the fact that Helen didn't just go on to live a long life but became an advocate for people with disabilities, as well as a speaker and author.

What kind of woman was she? She was one of five children born to a Confederate captain-turned editor, once part of Alabama's slave-owning elite. After being struck deaf and blind as a baby, Helen initially got by using simple sign language to communicate. She learned to rely on taste, smell and touch, using her hands to read people's lips. Despite never being able to speak as clearly as she might have liked (something she always regretted), she became a public speaker, though her words were translated for her audience by one of her constant companions – first Anne Sullivan, later Polly Thomson.

What made her a hero? The incredible tenacity and resilience she showed in overcoming her disabilities. After learning to read and write, she thrived at school and graduated from university – one of very few women then undertaking higher education. Most impressively of all, she sought to use the power of language to change the world, becoming a powerful advocate for women's suffrage and disability rights, among other issues. She helped transform perceptions of what it was to be deaf and blind at a time when people with such disabilities were often placed in asylums and distanced from society.

What was her finest hour? First, her campaigning, which helped lead to improvements in the lives of people with disabilities. Second, her role in nurturing the American Foundation for the Blind, which she supported for the rest of her life.

Can you see any parallels between her life and yours? The Confederation of British Industry, like many organisations, has had its ups and downs. And though I've never had to face the sort of adversity that Helen did, I've been inspired by her resilience and persistence, and have even used her quotes in speeches. Like her, I'm naturally an optimist at heart. Many of the things she said still resonate with me today – for instance: "Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement; nothing can be done without hope and confidence."

What would you ask Keller if you could meet her? I'd love to get her take on today's world, and find out how she thought we could best advocate for change on behalf of the less advantaged.

Rain Newton-Smith was talking to York Membery

In the BBC Radio 4 series **Great Lives**, guests discuss inspirational figures: *bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qxsb*

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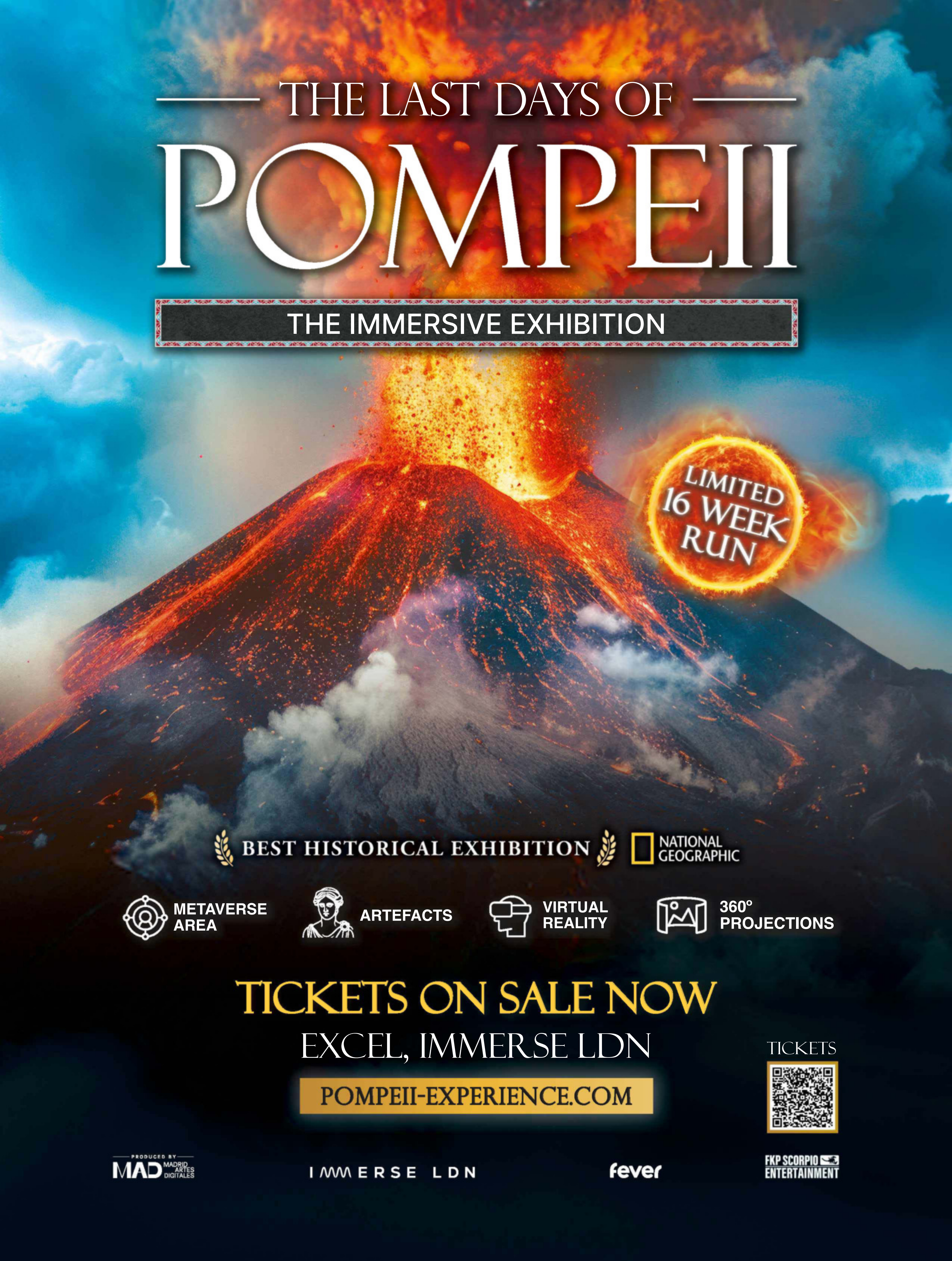

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